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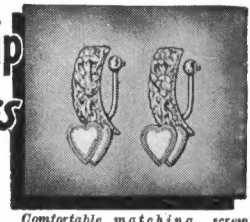

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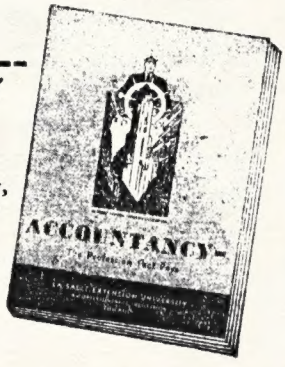

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HIYA, gals and galluses! I reckon you've heard the expression, "Once a Texan, always a Texan." In one way it's true, because a Texan never loses his way of talking or his pride for his State. In another way, it ain't true. Because *Tejanos* are the greatest roamers there ever was.

The cattlelands of the West were settled mainly by Texans, and Texas traditions still cling to the ranges. On the war fronts, Texas outfits always manage to be where there's the most fightin'. Texans are forever on the go, always braggin' up Texas.

If you ask one why he left, he'll probably tell you he craved to see other places so he could appreciate Texas more.

A Mystery of Nature

I met up with a mighty interesting stray Texan lately and aim to tell you about him. But first let's ponder on a mystery of Nature that makes me wonder if the Injuns weren't right when they claimed that white man didn't kill off all the buffalo. That the Great Spirit saw the bloody slaughter and was sad. And then fixed it so the buffalo disappeared from the Great Plains, migrating on the winds of Heaven to the Happy Hunting Grounds of the red man.

That's what the Injuns say about the buffalo. And now I halfway believe it, because another numerous specimen of wild life has suddenly vanished.

I was on hand to witness this phenomenon up Oregon way. It so happens that yours truly ranges wide, Texas style.

The critter ain't hardly comparable to the noble buffalo, biggest game animal ever to inhabit the American continent. It happens to be the humble eel.

Now here's the story, just as it happened this very year.

Lamprey eels in vast numbers, since the beginning of time, have ascended the Willamette River to spawn their young. Then, like the salmon, the parents end their life cycle by drifting downstream in a moribund state to perish and rot.

A Heap of Complaint

Well, as the lower Willamette valley settled up, this annual eel migration got to be a nuisance that caused a heap of complaint of an olfactory nature. A few million eels, all dying and rotting at once, filled the air with a fragrance that couldn't be mistook for the perfume of Portland roses.

So an up-and-coming fishery products firm got set last spring to trap a record catch of lamprey eels, to convert them into valuable oils and meals and fertilizer.

They Didn't Show Up!

What happened? The enterprise was a flat failure. Why? The eels, for the first time in the memory of man, failed to appear in the Willamette!

The laws of Nature are supposed to be the most inflexible life principle. But they flexed plenty in this eel disappearance. Eels used to be important food to the Oregon Injuns, same as buffalo were to Texas Injuns. Folks that study eels and such say that there's just as many eels as ever out in the deep, viewless sea.

But who can say for certain?

We all recollect how the passenger pigeons that darkened the sky for hours with their passing, they just up and became extinct. They weren't killed off by man, not in so short a time. What happened to 'em? What's happened to the eels? Has the Great Spirit been making medicine again?

But enough of this gloomy talk about the disappearance of wild things. A more cheerful situation is the rapid increase of fur-bearing critters. I'm told that fisher, marten and beaver are numerous enough in some localities so that there's talk of re-opening trapping season on 'em.

The Stray Texan

This brings us to the stray Texan I mentioned.

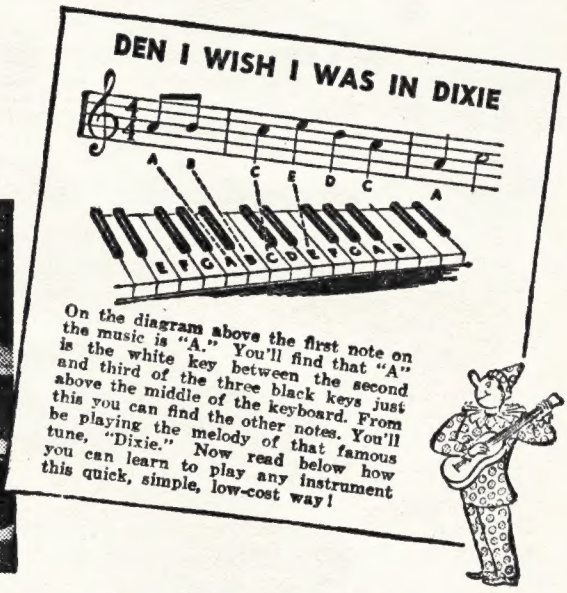
Herman, son of a west Texas homesteader, learned to ride, hunt, punch cattle and trap and take care of himself frontier-style. Then at the age of 15 he hopped on a horse and headed alone for the Pacific Northwest. He travelled for 61 days with his horse and an old .32 Marlin rifle for company. Reaching the cool, green timberlands, he went to work as a government lion hunter and trapper.

"Hardship? No, it was fun!" Herman told me when I came onto him up in the jackpine country, sawing a winter's supply of wood. "It was fun and I aim to have some more of it this winter, maybe. If I can find me a good pardner. Y'see, Oregon law doesn't let one man run a trapline anymore. Not in the high mountains. Too many went out alone and never came back. So trappers come in pairs

(Continued on page 8)

LOOKS EASY.... AND IT IS EASY!

—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"



On the diagram above the first note on the music is "A." You'll find that "A" is the white key between the second and third of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

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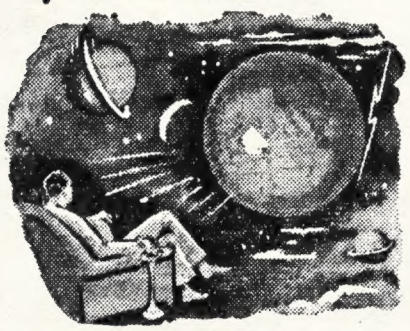

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

nowadays, like pants, scissors and chickenhawks."

Herman's trap run was along the crest of the Cascades from Mt. Hood down to Crater Lake, almost the length of the State. A 250-mile stretch, about as far as from New York City to Washington, D.C.

A Chain of Shelters

He built himself a chain of 11 dugout shelters, with a headquarters dugout in the middle of the chain. In the fall, before the snows came, he packed supplies into these dugouts. Grub, traps, tools and a little bedding.

"Took a heap of bedding up there in those howling white winters, didn't it, Herman?" I asked.

"One Army blanket was plenty. Dugouts are real snug. Had a stove or fireplace in each, with plenty of kindling and firewood on hand. Stored my furs in the dugouts, too."

Rugged Country

Anybody who's seen the high Cascades in summertime knows that there's miles of country a man can't pierce. Not only is it rugged but there are jackpine thickets and deadfall which are plumb impenetrable. To say nothing about swarms of hungry mosquitoes. But when heavy snow blankets the mountains, a man can travel almost anywhere. If he's not afraid, and if he rigs for it.

The way Herman rigged was with dogs. Horses would have been helpless in the deep drifts.

He didn't use a dog sled, generally. He rode skis and let two dogs pull him. The dogs were also trained to track and hunt. On a packboard he carried his day's needs.

When he sighted quarry, such as a cougar, he unleashed the dogs and had at it.

"Yessir, I had me a mighty good time," Herman reflected. "And made mighty good money. The scalps of predators was all the government wanted. That left me free to sell them hides. I trapped everything, even skunks. For a two-stripe skunk, $3, for a one-striper, $6, and for a skunk without stripes, $12."

That was the first I knew that skunks sometimes came without stripes.

An Argument with a Bear

"That was about what I got for a bearskin," Herman continued. "But a bear was a good

(Continued on page 75)

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JANUARY 14-31

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*City*_____ *State*_____

By a mighty effort, Jim Hatfield shoved the engineer's body free and sprawled after it (Chap. XIII)

GUNS OF THE HAUNTED HILLS

By JACKSON COLE

Pitting His Lightning Gun Hand Against the Dynamite Traps and Fiendish Cunning of a Human Rattler, a Daredevil Ranger Breaks the Death Grip of San Benito's Vicious Crew of Bandit Killers!

CHAPTER I

Star of Empire

A RIVER of emerald between banks of rusty iron, the San Benito Valley flows southward toward the great bow formed where the Rio Grande turns northeast for more than a hundred miles before resuming its gulfward trend, the string of which is the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The hills to the east and to the west are harsh, unlovely, almost devoid of vegetation, for they are uptilted slabs of arid desert, raking the brassy-blue Texas sky with crooked claws of stone. Dark, mysterious canyons slash their beetling ramparts. Dry washes run up their gaunt sides. Strangely marbled ledges stripe them. Here and there is a patch of raw, glaring color reflecting the sunlight in prismatic hues. Their gloomy desolation is the more forbidding because of the startling contrast of the fertile valley which they guard.

A COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

JIM HATFIELD PLUNGES INTO THE THICK OF

The valley is shaped like a giant horn. At its head it is less than thirty miles wide. Its mouth, full seventy miles to the south, where the hills fall back and the rich rangeland merges with the stark barrenness of the Espantosa Desert, its width is nearer sixty. Well watered and amply wooded, grown with needle and wheat grasses, it was cattle country at its best.

A few miles from the beetling west wall ran a trail that wound lazily between groves and thickets, a thin line of tarnished silver threading the placid river of green. Over this trail a dust cloud rolled steadily southward toward the valley mouth. Streaking and striating the cloud were the brown heads and gleaming horns of a trail herd. Eyes flashed eerily through the gray swirl, and the silence was curdled by the bawl and mutter of the tired beefs.

Some five miles north of the valley mouth, a lone horseman sat watching the approaching dust cloud. The level rays of the low lying sun gleamed redly on the glossy coat of his magnificent roan gelding that stood still as a statue atop a little mound a few yards from the trail.

The rider was a huge, massively built man with a square, blocky face. His hair, hanging in a curling mane almost to his coat collar, was streaked with gray, as was the small, aggressive tuft that jutted from his big chin. He had a hard mouth under a great beak of a nose. His eyes were gray, very clear, very arrogant, and very masterful. He lounged easily in the saddle, as motionless as the horse he bestrode. His long black coat, thrown back, revealed a cartridge belt from which hung a heavy gun, on the left side, butt to the front. His eyes glittered as they rested on the dust cloud that steadily drew nearer.

RIDING a hundred yards or so in front of the trail herd was a lithe, slightly built young man of somewhat above medium height. He had a thin, eager face dominated by alert brown eyes. His expression was pleasant, his features regular, and there were humorous wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. His glance seemed continually to be searching the groves and thickets that flanked the trail, but some distance from it, and from time to time his gaze lifted to study the bleak slope of the nearer hills to the west. Opposite the mound where the big man sat his horse, he turned aside, slowed his rangy bay to a walk and slowly approached. Within easy speaking distance he drew rein and for a moment they studied one another.

The herd rolled on beneath its hovering cloud of dust. As it rumbled past the mound, point men, swing, flank and drag riders glanced curiously at the silent pair facing each other, but refrained from comment.

The drive had more than half passed before the big man spoke, his voice harsh, decisive, and as arrogant as his cold eyes.

"So yuh signed yore contract, eh, Audley?" he asked.

"That's right, Brocas."

"You were told not to."

"I ain't takin' orders from you or anybody else, Brocas."

The big man's lips tightened, the tuft on his chin jutted forward with added aggressiveness.

"Audley," he said, "yuh're aimin' to spoil the best cow country in Texas."

The lean man smiled, amusedly. "Brocas," he replied, "yuh're livin' in the past. You and yore sort are tryin' to put shoes under the wheels of progress. Yuh can't do it. This country is goin' to build up, and yuh might as well face the fact. If yuh face it squarely, and act accordin', the range ain't never goin' to be spoiled. If yuh insist on gettin' ringey and keep on pawin' sand, you fellers will end up doin' just that. Yuh're pawin' the hackamore without knowin' what's hurtin' yuh, Brocas. After all, roilin' the water just makes it muddy. Yuh're old enough to have plenty of wrinkles on yore horns, but yuh're actin' like yuh ain't got nothin' under yore hat but hair."

The big man flushed darkly, and there was an ugly glint in his eyes.

"Some day, Jack Audley, yuh're goin' to go too far," he said. "Yuh'd better tighten the latigo on the jaw of yores."

"I ain't aimin' to put yuh on the prod, Brocas," Audley replied quietly. "I'm just tellin' yuh gospel truth, only it sounds to you like drivel."

Brocas growled an oath. He glanced far southward toward where a faint smudge smouldered just above the horizon.

"That cussed railroad was bad enough!" he rumbled, then jerked his head toward another and much nearer smudge fouling the gold flecked blue of the sky to the west. "Coal mines! Yuh realize what them blasted mines will do to this section, Audley? They'll bring in more and more of the kind of hellions we don't want. Already they've changed Mota from a good cow town to a rumpus raiser of shacks and 'dobes. Used to be a cowman could set down in the Big Enough or any other saloon and have a drink in peace and comfort. Now the place is all cluttered up with chatterin' puddin'-foots with their faces blacked up like minstrel show performers, and the same goes for the dozen other places what have opened up since this minin' damphoolishness started. And yuh call that progress!"

"It is," Audley replied shortly. He glanced in the direction toward which Brocas was suddenly glaring.

"And I s'pose yuh call that progress, too?" the latter demanded, waving his hand.

Far to the southeast, where the hills that walled the farther side of the valley fell away sooner than those which flanked it on the west, a trail wound into view, topping a rise a couple of miles to the south and slithering in in a southwesterly direction. Over the crest of the rise a huge white object had risen into view. Lurching, swaying, rolling steadily at the heels of the six-horse team that drew it, it dropped down the long slope, its curved canvas billowing out in the breeze and catching the reddish glints of the sunlight. After it came another, and another, and still another. Finally a full dozen were sailing majestically toward the level ground at the foot of the rise. They were ships of the prairie, with all sails set, advancing inexorably, symbols of the new forces that were marching into the inexhaustible West—covered wagons!

"Those dab-busted things are bringin' in nesters—plow-chasers—and where they bog down, the cow business is done!"

AUDLEY stared at the older man. "Plenty of land for them there to the southwest, on the edge of the desert," he replied imperturbably. "They won't hurt the range, and they'll need cows, just like the mine workers need them. All this will do for us, Brocas, is provide a good, close market for our surplus stock. I'll make more money on this herd that I'm runnin' over to Mota to feed the miners than I could make on it by headin' for the shippin' pens and Eastern market."

"If yuh'd stick with us, we'd starve the blisterin' dirt-scratchers out!" Brocas returned, his face darkening again.

Audley slowly shook his head. "Nope, Clate, yuh wouldn't starve them out," he disagreed. "The railroad is already runnin' a spur up to Mota, as yuh very well know. If we don't provide 'em with beef, they'll ship it in by rail, that's all. We'll just be cuttin' off our noses to spite our faces."

JIM HATFIELD

"It would cost 'em too cussed much to ship beefs in," Brocas growled. "This is goin' to end up in big trouble, Audley, and yuh'll be responsible."

Audley shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "We ain't gettin' anywhere with this gabfest," he replied. "Adios!"

He spoke to his horse and rode swiftly in pursuit of the already distant dust cloud that marked where his trail herd rolled steadily to the southwest. Clate Brocas, hard of mouth, dry of eye, glared after him.

Audley quickly overtook the herd, slowed down beside his foreman, Tom Graham, and spoke with him for several moments, regaling the foreman with a detailed account of his

conversation with Clate Brocas, the Cross C owner.

Graham shook his head pessimistically. "There's goin' to be trouble," he predicted in dolorous tones. "The Cross C is the biggest outfit in this section, and Brocas has plenty of drag with folks. He's a salty hombre, too. Mebbe we're makin' a mistake, Boss."

"Mebbe," Audley replied. "But I'll take a chance. I'm ridin' on ahead to Mota and see things are arranged to run this herd into the yard. Be seein' yuh, Tom."

He skirted the herd and rode toward where a long wooden bridge spanned a fairly wide stream running swiftly between high, steep banks. There was a ford, negotiable by a mounted man, a little farther up the stream, but it was too narrow to accommodate a herd, and the water was too deep and swift to permit swimming the beefs across.

The bay's hoofs rang hollowly on the warped floor boards of the bridge, the span of which was supported by a single central pier of roughly hewn stone. Audley sent the horse across at a good pace, rode a few hundred yards, turned and glanced back. Already the herd was streaming across the bridge, the point and swing men grouped near the northern anchor-pier, the flank and drag riders urging the stragglers ahead.

Audley watched until the last hoof thumped onto the floor boards, then turned his face southwest again. Some instinct caused him to glance back over his shoulder once more. And as he did so, a vast cloud of yellowish smoke, streaked by reddish flame, billowed up from the central pier. Through the rolling clouds, the astounded rancher saw huge timbers, shaggy bodies and blocks of stone whirling in mid air. The hills rocked and shuddered to the roar of an explosion.

For a paralyzed instant, Audley sat rigid in the saddle, his head slanted over his shoulder. Then, with a gasping oath, he jerked his horse to a slithering halt, wheeled him and raced back toward the rolling smoke cloud and the shattered bridge. As he neared the span he saw the bodies of stricken cattle rolling over and over in the swift flood beneath the splintered rails and flooring. Even as he gazed the whole structure collapsed with a deafening crash. The river water churned and foamed, and the ranch owner's horror stricken eyes saw floating amid the tossing wreckage, a wide-brimmed hat!

The bay splayed to a halt on the lip of the anchor pier, from which hung a tangle of bolted wood-work. Audley peered through the rising smoke cloud to the group on the far bank. The cowboys were fighting desperately to control their panic-stricken horses.

"Everybody all right?" Audley called anxiously, his first thought for his men.

"Everybody but Tom Graham," a voice answered grimly. "He was on the bridge when it let go."

AUDLEY stared at the swirling water, his face white and strained. A man down there would have about as much chance as a rabbit in a hound's mouth, he well knew. He numbly recalled the hat tossing amid the broken timbers. His eyes searched the water in vain for a swimmer. His mouth thinned into a hard line.

"Ride back to the ranch and start gettin' another herd together," he called clearly. "Nothin' yuh can do here. This bridge will be rebuilt pronto. We'll be ready to run a herd across as quick as it'll hold 'em up. Sift sand, now. I'm headed for town."

He whirled his horse and sent him racing toward the distant smoke smudge that hovered over Mota. His face was still white, his mouth hard-set, and there was a look in his usually pleasant eyes that was not good to see.

After reporting to the sheriff's office what had occurred, he repaired to the Imperial Coal Company's cattle yard and explained why the promised herd could not be delivered on time. Then, after seeing wagons loaded with men and materials streaming toward the scene of the disaster, he sat down in the office of the Cattlemen's Hotel and wrote a long letter which he sealed and mailed a little later.

"So they're willin' to go in for murder to run the mine out of the section!" he muttered grimly. "Well, we'll see. There's saltier men in Texas than you and yore outfit, Clate Brocas, and yuh're due to find it out!"

CHAPTER II

Stroke of the Sidewinder

IN HIS office at Ranger headquarters at Franklin, Captain Bill McDowell sat reading his morning mail. Beside his desk, high heels hooked comfortably over the rounds of his tilted chair, sat Jim Hatfield, he whom a stern old lieutenant of Rangers had named the Lone Wolf. Hatfield was some four inches taller than the grizzled, frosty-eyed captain, who himself was a six-footer.

Hatfield had broad shoulders, a deep chest, lean waist and hips. He had a wide mouth with pleasantly turned-up corners which somewhat relieved the tinge of fierceness evinced in the powerful chin and the prominent, high-bridged nose. From behind the hawk nose gazed long, level, black-lashed eyes of a peculiar shade of green. The brows above the strangely colored eyes were also black, as was the thick, crisp hair over his

Hatfield crashed through the bushes and into the narrow crevice (CHAP. IX)

broad brow. He wore the careless garb of the rangeland, and wore it as Richard of the Lion-Heart must have worn his armor, easily, without consciousness it was picturesque. Double cartridge belts encircled Hatfield's waist, and to them hung heavy guns, from the black butts of which his slender, sinewy hands seemed never far.

Captain Bill McDowell opened a letter, read it slowly and with interest. Still holding it in a gnarled hand, he glanced at Hatfield under his tufted brows.

"From a feller named Audley over on the edge of the Espantosa Desert country," he announced. "I knowed his father well. Fine feller, old Burton Audley. Seems there's trouble in the makin' over there. Audley just had a trail herd blowed into the Espantosa River while they was crossin' a bridge. Steers were headed for that new coal mine what's opened up over there, to feed the hands. Seems old timers up in San Benito Valley don't hanker to have the minin' operations go on, and ain't over particular how they stop 'em. I've a notion the makin' of a first-class cattle war has started, seein' as how Audley has contracted to supply the minin' company with plenty of meat. Feller was killed when that bridge pier was blowed up by somebody. Audley suspects a feller named Brocas who's been tryin' to copper Audley's contract. Looks like Brocas is a sort of pack leader over there. Hmmm! I recollect gettin' another letter from up there, just a few days before you got back from Hudspeth County. It was from the feller who is openin' up the coal mine, feller by the name of Wainwright, if I remember right. The letter said he was havin' trouble with trouble-makers who had burned buildin's and started fights with his workers, and so on. Asked for a troop to be sent there to keep order. I didn't have anybody to send right then, and figgered, too, that it was a job for the local authorities. Wrote him to take it up with the sheriff. Hmmm!"

McDowell's grizzled brows drew together in thought, but he laid the letter aside without further comment, tossed several advertising circulars into the waste basket, and paused with a large square envelope in his hand.

"Here's one addressed to you, Jim," he remarked. He handed the envelope to Hatfield and watched curiously as his Ranger Lieutenant and top rider tore it open.

From the envelope Hatfield took a folded sheet of very heavy, glazed paper. He opened the sheet, glanced at it, and silently handed it to McDowell. The old Ranger Captain took it, his face darkened and he rumbled an oath.

There were no words on the paper, only a crude drawing of a coiled rattlesnake, mouth open, fangs protruding, tail vibrating.

Captain Bill snorted with anger and disgust. "Another one of the blamed things!" he growled. "How many does that make—five—six? Is some locoed fool goin' plumb crazy?"

Hatfield gazed at the drawing, and shook his head. "I don't figger that way," he replied in a deep, low voice, a fitting voice to come out of that great chest. "I reckon somebody's makin' a threat."

Cap. Bill snorted again. "And is he hopin' to scare you by sendin' pictures of snakes?" he demanded. "Does he think Rangers'll pay any attention to such things?"

Still fuming under his moustache, he crumpled the offending sheet into a ball and hurled it across the room into the fireplace, in which the fire had died to a few glowing embers.

The balled paper landed in the midst of the embers. From it arose a whitish smoke like to the miasmatic mist that slithers up from the surface of a poisonous swamp. The smoke thickened, seemed to curdle.

Without warning the room rocked to a crackling roar. Ashes and glowing embers shot into the air. A hurricane blast tore across the room. There was a thudding crash as the chimney came down in a rain of loosened bricks. Hatfield's chair splintered to the floor under his over-balanced weight. Captain Bill's desk up-ended, the Captain with it. The room filled with an acrid, suffocating gas.

BLINDED, deafened, Jim Hatfield staggered to his feet. He groped through the choking fumes, hauled the cursing, struggling McDowell from under the overturned desk and reeled with him to the door, sending it banging open with a heave of his big shoulders. He breathed in great gulps of life-giving air, his whirling senses steadied, his eyes cleared of the stinging tears that blinded him.

All around were shouts and the thud of running feet. Hatfield shook his head, cleared it of the last mists that swathed his brain, and faced the men who came running up.

"Was loadin' some shells and tipped a can of powder into the fireplace by accident," he explained before McDowell could speak. "Nobody hurt, but it shore ruined Captain Bill's office."

"Golly, but it must've been a big can of powder!" marveled a Ranger. "Sounded like a dozen sticks of dynamite let go. Just look at that chimney! Bricks blowed clean across the street!"

Captain Bill was bleeding from a cut over one eye. Hatfield took him by the arm and started him down the street. "Better have Doc Beard sew that up," he counseled. "We'll come back and clean up later."

The amazed Captain McDowell could only sputter.

"What in tarnation are yuh up to?" he managed at last, when they had cleared the crowd that was busy stamping out the glowing embers scattered over the floor of the wrecked office.

Hatfield glanced over his shoulder, saw that they were out of earshot, and replied, in low tones.

"Reckon that was about as close as you and me ever came to taking the Big Jump together," he said in grave tones. "If we'd been standing beside the fireplace, or had stuffed that blamed thing into a stove, we'd be tuning our harps right now."

"But how—what—why?" gasped Captain Bill. "Why'd yuh spout that tall one about spillin' powder into the fire? What happened, anyhow?"

"Just this," Hatfield replied tersely, as they turned aside toward the doctor's office. "We finally did just what that hellion who has been sending me those drawings figgered I'd do sooner or later—get mad and chuck the darn thing into the fire. That's what he had in mind all along. That wasn't paper. It was some kind of explosive that looked like paper. When it came in contact with the fire, it let loose a gas that exploded. Lucky for us, it was a big open fireplace and clear across the room. Nothing much but ashes to blow out. If there'd been a big fire there, like there was early this morning, when it was cold, things might've turned out different. We were lucky, that's all."

His eyes subtly changed color as he spoke, until they were the icy gray of clouds hurrying across a winter sky.

"The hellion, whoever he is, has tipped his hand now, though," he remarked.

"But who in blazes could it be?" sputtered McDowell.

Hatfield shrugged his broad shoulders. "Reckon I ain't popular with a gent or two hereabouts," he replied. "I can call to mind a couple like that."

"One or two dozen would be more like it, I reckon," growled McDowell.

Hatfield nodded. "I'll be on the lookout from now on," he remarked.

Captain Bill grunted. "Just the same you'd better change yore stampin' ground for a spell," he said with decision. "This blind gropin' don't set well with me. That scheme was mighty clever. It took brains to think that one up. Uh-huh, I'm sendin' you away while the rest of us hunt for that pitcher-drawin' gent. We'll keep a eye on yore outtrail and if the hellion tries to follow yuh, that'll give us a chance to drop a loop on him. Never mind arguin', now—" as Hatfield opened his lips to protest—"I'm still handin' out the orders hereabouts, and yuh're gettin' one right now. You pull out for the San Benito country—it's about eighty miles southeast of here—and investigate the situation over there. Chances are it don't amount to much, just sod-pawin' between a couple of outfits, but those things sometimes build up to big trouble if they ain't stopped quick. The Mason County cattle war started from just such a beginnin'. Give it yore attention, Jim, and calm down those smoke-breathin' gents before they start buck-jumpin' all over the range. John Audley's letter worries me. One killin' is aplenty.. You hit the trail this afternoon, Jim."

CAPTAIN BILL McDOWELL meant well. Hatfield knew the Captain himself felt he was sending his ace-man on a chore that could well be performed by the local authorities of the section. His eyes rested with real affection on the old fighter's face. Captain Bill's first thought was for the men who served under him. It was said of Bill McDowell that he would charge a whole prairie fire with nothing more than a bucket of water, and the statement was not an exaggeration of the Ranger chief's courage. Captain Bill expected like courage on the part of his men, but just the same he was continually going out of his way to shield them from what he considered unnecessary risk. Right here was an instance.

Hatfield himself had not been impressed by the attempt at assassination. It had been spectacular, yes, but no more deadly than a drygulcher's bullet, and he had encountered bushwhackers many times before. He did not discount the vicious cunning evinced by the unknown menace, but he also sensed that the method employed denoted a cautiousness that verged on cowardice.

He recalled with satisfaction that he had saved others of the mysterious drawings. After completing his preparations for the eastward ride, he retrieved the four glazed sheets from a drawer and carefully examined them.

The glazing on the heavy sheets was peculiar. It was yellowish, faintly lustrous. He touched one to his tongue. The taste was excessively bitter, like to concentrated quinine. Slowly, and with the greatest care, he tore off a minute corner. Placing it on the window ledge at the far side of the room, he struck it a smart blow with the butt of a six-shooter. Nothing happened. Standing well back from the window, he held a lighted match at arm's length, and dropped it onto the fragment. There was a puff of smoke and a tiny explosion, which had force enough, however, to dent the window sill.

"A nitrocellulose compound of some kind, I'd say," he mused. "Judging from the bitter taste, I'd say picric acid as a base. But the sneakin' coyote somehow managed to alter or modify the compound so it doesn't respond to shock. Safe enough so long as yuh keep it away from fire. Smart, all right. Wish I was chemist enough to figger how he

did it. Mebbe he's got something new there. I'd like to send the darn things to a laboratory to have them analyzed, but can't very well take a chance on sending them through the mails; an accident might happen, and judging from the trouble that one sheet raised when it hit the fire, there's enough here to blow up a railway train. Nope, that will have to wait."

He rummaged out a large water-proofed tobacco pouch, folded the sheets and stuffed them into the pouch, which he buttoned safely in an inside pocket.

A few minutes later he shook hands with Captain Bill McDowell, received a last crusty word of advice, and rode out of town, the low lying sun at his back, its rays shimmering the coat of Goldy, his splendid golden sorrel.

Yes, McDowell meant well, but unwittingly he sent Jim Hatfield to keep a rendezvous with death!

CHAPTER III

Hills of Midas

THE hills that flank the mouth of San Benito Valley on the west are particularly gaunt and unlovely. Their reddish slopes, treeless, speckled with huge rocks and boulders. Deep and wide dry washes scored them, their sides covered with flowering weeds. Now and again a canyon split the somber cliffs like the slash of some flaming sword of vengeance when the earth was young. There was nothing about those desolate hills to hint at other than the drabbest poverty. Dreary, monotonous, they had been shunned from the time the first Spaniard gazed upon them with weary disinterest. Prospectors, after a cursory examination of the forbidding and unpromising terrain, either circled them hereafter or passed over them as quickly as possible. The word got about and they were left severely alone, save when a band of marauding Apaches or a smuggling outfit from below the Line found temporary sanctuary there.

But all the while these hills were bursting with riches. They only awaited the scratch of the miner's pick in the proper place and they would gush forth a flood of wealth. But the years rolled on, and the grim wastelands hid their secret well.

A young Southern Pacific assistant freight agent with a smattering of engineering knowledge, scouting the San Benito Valley in search of business for his road, was struck by certain geological peculiarities of the western Espantosa Hills. He investigated, and hurried back to his superiors with the news of what he had discovered.

"Coal in those hills," he announced. "Good, thick veins, easy to work. Not particularly high grade—lignite—but it will burn all right in a locomotive firebox. It would pay the road to open up a mine there and run a spur across the Espantosa Desert to it. You'd get your coal for this division right here on the ground. It would eliminate the long haul from the east. Yes, it would pay."

But the railroad men were not enthusiastic. What he said might be true, they admitted, but, they asserted, they had enough trouble on their hands right now without getting mixed up in the coal business. The stock owners would not look with approval on further outlay diverted to auxiliary speculations. They had put their money into the building of a railroad and expected returns from the investment. They would not take kindly to further assessments, levied for such a purpose.

The young agent sensed opportunity. "Suppose a mine was opened and developed to the state of producing coal, under private ownership. Would the road build a spur to Mota, at the mouth of the San Benito Valley?"

The railroad men considered. "Yes," was their decision. "If the mine is opened and produces coal we can use, we'll build the spur, and we'll buy the coal."

"When you gentlemen say that much, it is enough for me," declared the agent. "I'm resigning my job and going into business for myself."

The former agent got busy. Firmly convinced he was right in his belief, with shrewd Scotch foresight, he first purchased from the State, at little cost, a large tract of land that embraced the whole lower section of the western Espantosa Hills. He hired a competent mining engineer, who had recently drifted into the section from back East, bearing good recommendations but at the moment out of a job. The engineer investigated the terrain and turned in a favorable report that sustained the agent's opinion.

The agent, Harrison Wainwright, interviewed friends and managed to scrape together enough capital to start operations, and opened the Imperial Mine. The S & P began building the spur to Mota.

As Wainwright had predicted, the vein proved thick enough to simplify getting out the coal, which was lignite of fairly good grade. The coal was not particularly gaseous, when the mine was opened, which eliminated the necessity of installing an expensive blower system. There was considerable water —bitter, corrosive—enough to require pumping, but not enough unduly to hamper operations.

Everything appeared to be going along rosily until Wainwright ran up against unexpected opposition. The big cattle barons of the section did not approve of his opera-

tions, and did not hesitate to say so. In the development they saw a threat to the open range, and heartily disapproved of the miners Wainwright imported from the East to work the mine.

The majority of the imported miners were of European peasant stock. They looked with appreciation on the rich farming lands of the section, and declared their intention, after they had made a stake working in the mine, to acquire land and settle down to the age-old profession of their European forbears—farming. They wrote back East and acquainted their friends there with conditions prevailing in the new country. The result was others emigrated, some already provided with money enough to purchase tracts of land southwest of Mota, along the arid fringe of the Espantosa Desert.

ALL these developments were noted with trepidation by the ranch owners of San Benito Valley. The land to the southwest was good, but not nearly so good as the fertile, hill-protected reaches of the San Benito. Their own titles to the valley land were none too secure, and they visioned the day when they would be forced to fight against nester encroachment.

"Just let enough of them dirt-scratchers get planted hereabouts, and they'll be worse than a swarm of locusts," arrogant, powerful Clate Brocas declared bitterly. "Boys, we got to do somethin'!"

The "boys" agreed, and when Harrison Wainwright tried to buy beefs from the ranchers to feed his workers, he was turned down cold. Only young John Audley, with the vision of youth, was amenable to Wainwright's proposition. Which earned him the bitter hatred of Clate Brocas, who was utterly intolerant of all opposition, an attitude built up during the course of years in which he, Brocas, had been a law to himself and the acknowledged despot of the range. Other ranchers disapproved of Audley's action, but admitted that he had a right to sell his cattle wherever he pleased.

"After all, Audley's young, and yuh must admit the old timers of the Benito have got the best markets sewed up tight," pointed out old man Jess Simpson, who was eminently fair in his dealings with all men, and exceedingly tolerant in his views.

"That's so," was the reply. "But just the same, Audley's a plumb fool to buck Clate Brocas and his crowd. He'll come to no good by it, just you wait and see. There's goin' to be big trouble in these parts."

The pessimistic ones proved to be no false prophets. Things began happening in the Espantosa country. The Imperial Coal Company suffered a disastrous fire of unexplained origin. There was a bad slate fall in a drift where the roof was apparently firm and without flaw, and two miners were killed and

The Lone Wolf sent bullets whistling toward the escaping man (CHAP. IV)

several others badly injured. The pumping machinery unexpectedly broke down, due to malicious tampering, and a week of production was lost while the accumulated water was being pumped out of the mine and the damage was being repaired.

Nor did the farmers southwest of town escape attention. Fences were cut, stock wide looped, barns burned. There was an ugly fight in Mota between a group of farmers and some of Clate Brocas' cowboys. The two factions—the Espantosa farmers and the San Benito ranchers—began to acquire the semblance of armed camps. The sheriff appointed more deputies, and talked loudly of law and order, but was unable to check the outrages. Big trouble was in the making.

So the situation stood that lovely Autumn day when Jim Hatfield saw the smoke smudge against the sky that marked the site of Mota, which had recently developed from a sleepy little desert pueblo to a hell-roarin' cattle and mining town and the hub of the seething welter of resentments that disturbed the peace of the Espantosa country.

A mile or so outside of town, he paused to water his horse at a little stream. It was a stream which flowed beside the trail, eventually to tumble into the deep gorge of Espantosa River.

Goldy sniffed at the water, wrinkled his nose, snorted, and drew back, shaking his sleek head in disapproval.

"Now what's ailin' yuh, you contrary jughead?" Hatfield said in wondering tones. He dismounted, scooped up a handful of the water and tasted it. Instantly he spat it out again. Bitterly astringent, it puckered his mouth and bit his tongue.

"Can't say as I blame yuh," he told the sorrel. "This ground-traveling rainstorm must've run through a sulphur factory. Reckon yuh'll have to chew dust until we hit town. If folks hereabouts drink that stuff, they must look like worried prunes. Sift sand, feller, isn't over-long to dark, and I shore could stand a helpin' or two of chuck. We been doing a heap of traveling for the last week."

Remounting, he rode leisurely until he reached the outskirts of the mining town, which consisted of rows of flimsily built houses evidently but recently put up. Hatfield surmised, rightly, that these were the dwellings of the men who had been imported to work the coal mine. His green eyes sparkled as he gazed upon the many children playing in the sunshine. His keen perceptions noted a newly acquired bloom of health on their small countenances.

"Nothing like Texas sun and Texas air to make kids grow frisky," he chuckled. "I've a notion those pore little tykes never saw anything like this before. Beginning to look plumb husky already, and from what Cap. Bill said, none of 'em could've been here for more'n five or six months. Well, we need them in Texas. What's the use of a fine big country without folks to grow up in it, and appreciate it. It's fine for them, and fine for the state."

HE FOUND a small livery stable situated on an alley, wherein Goldy had all his wants cared for. Then the Ranger Lieutenant dropped into a tiny restaurant run by a smiling Chinese who, Hatfield decided after sampling his dishes, must have once been head cook to the emperor, at least.

"Me got loom to lent up topside this flo'," the Chinese replied to Hatfield's question as to the whereabouts of a lodging house. He gestured to the wooden stairs which led from the restaurant to the second floor.

"You like?" he asked. "Just topside steps. All light, me give you key, if stay out late."

After eating, Hatfield strolled out onto the street and proceeded to look the town over. Night had fallen and the lighted windows were squares and rectangles of gold. Overhead the great Texas stars burned in a sky of black velvet. The Espantosa Hills towered dark and grim, enfolding the town in their ominous shadow, and to the south was the gray sheen of the Espantosa desert, which appeared, in the elusive starlight, as strange and alien to man as the spangled arch above.

Already the street was well crowded, and Hatfield smiled at the unaccustomed sounds that assailed his ears. The words of the jostling, good-natured throng in this particular section of the town were utterly unfamiliar to him, as were the faces that flitted past in his range of vision.

"But they laugh just like other folks," he told himself. "Also the music coming out of those places, while it isn't just like cow camp music, is music, just the same. Music and laughter are plumb prime for gettin' folks to know each other and see that, after all, they're all cut out of purty much the same hide."

He entered one of the drinking places and leisurely approached the bar. Served by a friendly looking bartender who was obviously not a Texan, he leaned against the counter and sipped his drink, watching the while the activities around him. As he watched, he decided he liked these simple, homely strangers who had the ambition, courage, and vision to cross an unknown sea to a strange land in search of freedom and opportunity.

"Real folks," he mused. "And we need 'em. Just like they need us. They're what this country wants to build it up, to discover how grand and wonderful it really is. Their kids will become real Texans—real Americans—and when the time's ripe, they'll be ready to lend a hand."

His eyes softened as he gazed into the future with prophetic vision.

"Yes," he said softly. "They'll grow to love their new home, every one of them, and when America calls, they'll be the first to answer to the call."

He accepted a drink, proffered in halting English by a stocky man with a lonely face and a steady gaze, and was rewarded by a smile of grateful appreciation by the young miner who had extended the invitation.

There were women thronging the sidewalks outside, the wives and daughters of the workers, and more than one glance of frank admiration was cast at the tall man with the kindly mouth and strangely colored eyes, later when he strolled through the streets. He walked slowly, with a rhythmical perfection of movement, and approving eyes followed his towering, wide-shouldered form as he swung by.

He visited other places, listened to the twang of unfamiliar instruments, and to melancholy Russian songs that had in them the sufferings, the longings, and the hopes of a people.

But he instinctively sensed that, melancholy though the melodies might be, they now held a freedom, a zest for living, a faith in the future that had not been there when they were sung under the stars of another land beyond the stormy wastes of the Atlantic. Here, he sensed, was the Spirit of America already making itself manifest, pouring its life and vigor and strength into these men and women of a different world.

"They're ready to merge in with the nation," he said. "It's up to us, now. We can't let them down!"

CHAPTER IV

Death in the Dark

LEAVING the mining section of the town, which lay in the shadow of the tall gaunt tipple and other buildings of the mine, he turned into a better lighted street which he surmised was Mota's main thoroughfare. Here the scene quickly changed. Instead of corduroy and muddy boots, he saw batwing chaps, silken neckerchiefs, swinging cartridge belts and broad-brimmed "J.B.'s." This was the section of town devoted to the activities of the cattlemen.

Lithe young punchers were rubbing shoulders with sinewy Mexican vaqueros clad in black velvet adorned by much silver. To his ears came the sound of fiddles, guitars, banjoes. In this part of town, instead of intricate games played with many cards, poker, faro, and monte reigned supreme. Dice were skipping across green cloths like spotty-eyed devils. Roulette wheels were whirring as the little ivory balls went clicking in the slots. Straight whisky was the beverage instead of mellow wine. Here was America and Texas already full-blown, virile, hearty, keen as sword-edge, boisterous and explosive. Hatfield instinctively hitched his double cartridge belts a little higher about his sinewy waist, and his green eyes took on an alertness that had been absent in the mining section.

He paused before a wide, brilliantly lighted window that had "Big Enough" emblazoned across the panes. A moment later he entered the saloon.

The big room was crowded, and the crowd was boisterous. The great mirror-blazing bar was lined. The card tables were fully occupied. The dance floor was a swirl of spangled short-skirts blending with the gay shirts and neckerchiefs of the cowboys. The somber silver-shimmering velvet of the sprinkling of vaqueros provided a rich background to the shifting kaleidoscope of brilliant color. An excellent orchestra made music, and over-toning the sprightly click of high heels and the solider clump of masculine boots was a bellowing of song, or what passed for it.

"Payday in this section, shore as blazes!" Hatfield deduced. "Hmmm! Plenty of 'em ripe and set for trouble, too. And some of these gents hereabouts shore look like they've raced a sheriff for the county line more'n once."

He found a place at the bar and ordered a drink. Then he leisurely studied the scene before him.

One group attracted his attention. Seated around a table near the center of the room were half a dozen men who appeared to be keeping very much to themselves. One, Hatfield noted in particular. He was young, slightly built, and had a thin, intelligent face chiefly noteworthy for alert, eager brown eyes. It seemed to the Ranger that the eyes were at the moment more somber than was their usual wont. His lips were set in stern lines, clamped tight, the corners slightly drawn down, although they showed an unmistakeable tendency to quirk upward.

"Something worryin' that hombre, or I'm a heap mistaken," the Lone Wolf mused. "A ranch owner and some of his hands," he added to himself. "Don't appear to be havin' much of a good time."

The observant head-barkeep noticed the direction of Hatfield's gaze.

"That's Jack Audley and some of his Bar A hands," he remarked in low tones.

"They don't seem to be any too popular," Hatfield said. "What's wrong?"

"Well," replied the barkeep, glancing about to see if anyone was taking note of the conversation, "the Bar A is sellin' cows to the new coal minin' company. Folks here in San Benito don't like it. The Bar A are traitors."

"Then the coal mine ain't liked?"

"I'll say it ain't. It's bringin' in too many danged furriners into this country. Nesters have begun takin' up land over to the southwest, and it's ruinin' the range. You know what fences does to open range. The key spots in San Benito is supposed to be private owned land, but I reckon the titles ain't over sound. I know some of the boys have already started takin' steps to improve 'em. Clate Brocas is dead set against the minin' business, and what Clate says around here shore goes. He's mighty riled at Audley for sellin' beef to the minin' company."

An impatient customer was hammering on the bar nearby. The drink juggler hurried off to attend to his wants.

Hatfield speculated the group at the table. "So that's Audley," he mused. "Doesn't look like a bad sort."

He turned back to the bar, and continued to study the room, as reflected in the mirror of the back bar.

THE barkeep came sauntering back, opened his lips to speak, glanced toward the swinging doors, and swore querulously instead.

"Here comes Clate Brocas and his Cross C riders right now," he fussed. "I was hopin' they'd stay outa here tonight. Folks is shyin' away from Clate since that bridge was blowed up and the Bar A foreman drowned. I don't like Audley and him bein' here at the same time. This sort of thing makes me wish I wasn't a bartender."

Hatfield already was inspecting the seven or eight cowhands who were swaggering in through the swinging doors, led by a giant of a man with a blocky face, a belligerent tufted chin and flashing, arrogant eyes. The leader walked in the assured manner of one accustomed to having his own way, one who was utterly intolerant of opposition. Drinkers at the bar made way for him and his followers, and from that time on something closely approaching silence descended upon the room.

The Cross C riders, however, paid no attention to anybody. They ordered drinks, consumed them, and ordered more, talking the while among themselves in low tones. Clate Brocas, towering above their heads, dominated the conversation and was apparently fully at ease, but Hatfield noticed that his broad, powerful hands were never still. He tapped on the bar with blunt fingers, fiddled with his glass, hitched his gun belt and from time to time tugged at the collar of his shirt, which was held in place by a black string tie. The tie and his flowing black coat were his concessions to an owner's dignity, in which he differed from his men, who wore sagging vests over vividly colored shirts, with neckerchiefs looped loosely abut their sinewy throats.

Hatfield's attention was divided between Brocas and his men and the quiet group at the nearby table. He saw that John Audley hardly took his eyes off Brocas, and the look in these eyes was not pleasant to see.

Brocas, although his back was to Audley, seemed to sense the other's bitter glare. He became more and more nervous, and fidgeted the more as the drinks he consumed got hold of him. Finally, without any preliminary warning, he whirled to face Audley, his eyes blazing, his face twisted with resentment.

"Who do yuh think yuh're lookin' at, Audley?" he spat.

John Audley slowly got to his feet and faced the angry ranch owner. A sudden hush fell over the room. When Audley spoke, his voice rang clearly.

"Brocas, I'm lookin' at a low-down drygulcher who'd eat off the same plate with a snake!"

The hush deepened to dead silence. Brocas, his face contorted, his eyes flickering flames, stared at Audley as if not believing his ears. Then he appeared to swell visibly. With a rumbling oath, his right hand flashed across his thick middle to the crosspull gun swinging low and to the front.

Audley reached, too, but his move was awkward, in comparison, pitifully slow. Brocas' gun had cleared leather before Audley's hand reached the butt of his.

Jim Hatfield went down the bar in a panther-like bound. His lowered shoulder, with all his two hundred pounds and more of sinewy muscle behind it, smacked against Brocas' gun arm.

It was as if Brocas had suddenly taken unto himself wings. He shot off his feet, sailed through the air, hit a table and took it to the floor in splintered ruin with him. The gun flew from his hand and clattered across the room.

The Circle hands whirled, cursing, guns coming out. Then they halted in grotesquely strained positions. They were staring into the yawning muzzles of two long black guns, which seemed to single out each and every one of the group for distinct and individual attention. Hatfield spoke a single quiet word.

"Don't!" he said.

He was not misunderstood.

From the tail of one eye he saw Brocas lurching to his feet, madness in his eyes, his blood-streaked face strained with rage, but also wearing a decidedly dazed and bewildered expression.

Hatfield spoke again, addressing the Circle C riders.

"That wouldn't have been a man-to-man killing. It would have been plain murder, and you fellers know it. Stop pawin' the hackamore, and get yore feet back on the ground."

It was Brocas himself who snapped the tension. He spoke to his men, his voice surprisingly clear and quiet.

"Reckon that big feller chawed a mouthful when he said that. Yep, I shore would have been sorry about now." He turned to face Audley. "But just the same you are goin' to go too far some day, and yore luck won't hold all the time." He spoke the last words with vicious emphasis. Then he nodded to his men. "Come on, boys, let's get out of here."

PICKING up his fallen gun, the old rancher jammed it into its holster and headed for the door. His men, with compressed lips and menacing backward glances, filed out after him.

Hatfield sheathed his guns with the same swift, effortless ease with which he had drawn them, and turned back to the bar. He lifted his brimming glass with a hand that did not spill a drop, eyed it contemplatively, and set it down again without drinking.

"I'll take some water with this one," he remarked to the ashen bartender.

The drink juggler stared at him, jaw sagging. Wordlessly he drew a glass of water and placed it at the Ranger's elbow. Then he wiped the sweat from his face with a trembling hand, and sagged against the bar.

"Gracias, feller!" he gasped. "Mucha gracias! Another minute and the hull roof would've blowed off this joint. Oh, gosh! Why'd I ever become a bartender!"

Hatfield felt a tap on his shoulder. He had seen, in the back bar mirror, Audley leave the table and approach him. He turned now, at the touch of the young cattleman's hand.

"And I want to say much obliged, too," said Audley. "Won't you come over to the table and have a drink with me and the boys?"

Hatfield accepted the invitation with a nod. He supplied his name and was ceremoniously introduced to the Bar A riders. Drinks were ordered and conversation dealing with general range matters of the section began. No mention was made of what had just happened, no explanation offered. Hatfield liked Audley and his men for that.

Some time later, the Bar A owner and his hands rose to go. On his feet, Audley asked Hatfield his first direct question of the evening:

"Stickin' around in this section for a spell, or just ridin' through?"

"Can't say for shore," Hatfield replied. "Might coil my twine if I happened to drop a loop on a job of ridin' to my likin'. Understand there are quite a few good ranches hereabouts."

Audley nodded. "Ride up to my place when yuh're of a mind to," he invited. "Just about a twenty-mile jaunt up the valley. Ranchhouse sets right alongside the trail, to the left, goin' in. My ranch is the second one from the mouth of the valley. The only one that takes in a section of the Espantosa Hills. I own a slice just north of the minin' property. They wanted to buy from me, too, but my father told me, before he cashed in, to hold onto that hill land. There are deep canyons runnin' way back into the sage, and some of 'em have water in 'em—the only ones in the hills to have it, incidentally. Ain't over good water, but steers will drink it, and there's good shelter from the heat back there in drought times."

"What would you ranchers do if a blizzard should happen to hit?" asked Hatfield.

"That's one thing this valley is sort of scairt of," answered Audley. "It's a regular suck-hole, and a bad blizzard would make it mighty hard on cattle. Haven't had any durin' my time, but the Old Man recollected one when he was young, and he didn't forget what happened to the cattle. So I decided to hold onto the hills, even though the minin' engineer's report said the coal veins didn't run that far north. Wainwright wasn't over anxious to buy, but he said he reckoned he'd like to have that section, too, as a protection to his property in case new veins might be hit on there, as he figgered, at first, they might be. Sort of lost interest, though, when his engineer turned in his report. Mebbe I ought to have sold—I could use the money."

"I've usually found out old timers know what they are talking about," Hatfield observed. "Time might come when yuh'd value that advice. If a real bad blizzard should happen to hit and all of a sudden yuh found yoreself the only owner who hadn't lost most of his stock, as has happened more'n once in this country, you'd have reason to thank yore dad."

"Guess mebbe yuh're right," agreed Audley. "Yuh'll drop in soon? I want to talk with yuh."

"Yes, I'll drop in the next day or so," Hatfield said.

After Audley and his men had left, Hatfield strolled back to the bar for a moment before leaving.

"Nice young feller, Jack Audley," observed the bartender, who had changed his views in the last few minutes. "Uh-huh, Clate Brocas might've been sorry if he'd plugged him. Sorry on general principles, and for a particular reason, too, as yuh may find out."

HATFIELD glanced at him, but the barman did not amplify his rather peculiar remark, and Hatfield refrained from asking questions.

"Mebbe Audley didn't do so bad by himself, either, for sort of tyin' up with Wainwright and the Imperial," the barkeep added. "The railroad will be here before long, now, and coal'll start movin', and I've a notion the Imperial will be due to expand soon. I heard, too, they been findin' pockets of high-grade cannel coal of late. There's a good market

for that stuff, I been told. Brocas and his gang may see the day when they'll wish they'd have had savvy enough to get in on the ground floor. Never can tell. I wish I was in it, instead of this doggone liquor business!"

"Yuh got an interest in this place?" Hatfield asked curiously.

"Uh-huh, I own it," the aproned man replied sadly. "Excuse me a minute, feller, I got to empty the tills and put the dinero in the safe. The cussed things are so full I can't shut the drawers. Always somethin' goin' wrong in this blasted business. I wish I was outa it!"

Hatfield left the saloon chuckling to himself, and headed for his little room over the Chinese restaurant, which he had rented from the cheerful owner of the eating house.

As he fumbled the key to the front door the Chinese had given him, he was conscious of a feeling of hunger.

"Wonder if he's got any of that chicken stew left?" he chuckled. "I could stand a helpin' of that about now."

The front of the restaurant was dark, but Hatfield thought he could detect a gleam of light stealing through from the kitchen in the rear. He hesitated a moment, then skirted the building. He paused at a window, the shade of which was not entirely drawn, leaving a crack a few inches wide at the bottom. Through this crack showed a faint glow of light. Stooping, he peered through to see if the proprietor was still about.

From his point of vantage he could see a portion of the kitchen. At a table in the middle of the room sat the little Chinese. He was slumped forward, his head resting on one arm, the other hanging limply by his side. Standing on the table in front of him was his abacus, the little instrument with counters sliding on rods, by means of which the Chinese perform simple calculations.

"Was counting up the day's business and went to sleep on the job," the Ranger decided. "Those fellers work long hours. Well, I won't disturb him. Looks like he spilled something on the table, too."

He stared curiously at the dark stain which discolored the cleanly scrubbed wooden table top, and as he gazed his eyes narrowed slightly. His glance shifted to the limply hanging arm, which, it seemed to him, had an unhealthily flaccid appearance.

In Jim Hatfield was strongly developed that indefinable sixth sense that comes to men who ride with danger as a constant stirrup companion. Abruptly the silent monitor in his brain clamored that something here was not right. Hatfield had learned through years of experience not to disregard that disquieting warning.

The Chinese was sitting with his back to the kitchen door and Hatfield now noticed the door was slightly ajar. Again he scrutinized the motionless figure. Then he straightened up and stole around the corner of the building, and paused a moment to listen, before softly pushing the door open. Gliding silently into the room, he shut the door behind him and approached the Chinese. A single glance was enough to tell him that the dark stain on the wood was blood—blood which had flowed from an ugly gash in the side of the restaurant owner's head.

Stooping, he felt of the man's heart. It was beating, feebly, but steadily.

"Just knocked out," he muttered. "Looks bad hurt, though. Now what the devil has been goin' on here?"

He turned his gaze toward the open door which led into the dark eating room. The black opening almost had the appearance of a toothless mouth, gaping to scream, a mouth that had been silenced by a throttling hand on a purpling throat. Except for the feeble glow, cast by the dimly burning kitchen lamp, the place was in utter darkness.

Hatfield paused a moment, then walked with noiseless tread to the door, peered a moment, stepped inside. As his eyes became more accustomed to the shadows, he could dimly make out the rising bulk of the stairway leading to the second floor. He contemplated it, peering and listening. Abruptly he stiffened, and glanced upward.

From somewhere overhead had sounded a faint and stealthy creak, as if some one had cautiously shifted position and had trodden on a loose board. He stood motionless, just inside the circle of light, and listened.

THE sound was not repeated, but Hatfield felt an indefinable disquietude stealing over him. The building was deathly still, the deserted eating room bare and grim with the peculiar loneliness which sometimes haunts an untenanted room in the dead hours of night. But just the same, the Lone Wolf sensed a presence somewhere near. He could definitely feel that he was not alone, that hovering close to him was malevolent life. His skin prickled slightly, and instinctively his slender hands moved closer to the black butts of his guns.

For long moments he stood listening, then he glided silently across the shadowy room to the stairs.

Again he paused. And it seemed to him that the hovering presence was now much nearer. He glanced back toward the faintly glowing rectangle which marked the kitchen, then step by step, testing each tread carefully before trusting his weight upon it, he ascended the stairs.

In silence he reached the landing of the floor above. Before him stretched a narrow hallway. A window at the far end let in a little light, by aid of which he could make out the indenture of the closed door next to the stairhead, which opened into the room

he had rented for the night. Once again he heard that stealthy creaking, louder this time, and much nearer. Hatfield drew one of his guns.

Standing well to one side, he gripped the doorknob, and by infinitesimal degrees turned it until the latch was drawn clear back, making not the least sound in the process. Then he hurled the door wide open and crashing against the inner wall.

There was an instant of tingling silence echoing the crash, then a crackling explosion. Lances of flame gushed through the opening, and Hatfield heard the sharp smack of bullets against the opposite wall of the hallway.

Jerking his other gun, and crouching low, he sent shot after shot roaring through the door.

CHAPTER V

Wild Waters

DIMLY through the explosions of his own guns, Hatfield heard a cursing yell, a scrambling of feet, then a clang-jangle of splintering wood and shattering glass, followed by a distant thud He hesitated an instant, then streaked sideways through the door, crouching down along the inner wall, guns jutting forward, peering, listening. To his straining ears came a swift patter of running feet, outside the building. He bounded across the room to the window. His boots crunched on fragments of broken glass. He could see that sash and frame was a splintered ruin. As he peered through the jagged opening, he thought he saw a shadowy figure flit around the corner of a nearby building, but could not be sure in the uncertain starlight.

Hatfield stepped away from the window, stood listening a moment. Then he holstered one gun and struck a match. The tiny flame showed the room to be deserted.

"Must've missed the hellion in my flurry," he grunted, holstering his second gun. "But I sure did scare four pounds of fat off of him, though. Now what in blazes was he holed up in here for? Waiting for me? Looks that way. But why? And who could it have been? Mebbe aimed on drygulchin' somebody else, not knowing I had taken the room for tonight. I'll have to figger that out later. First thing is to see about the little feller downstairs."

He retraced his steps, picked up the slight form of the Chinese as if he had been a child, and left the restaurant. Not knowing where else to take him, he hurried with his unconscious burden to the Big Enough saloon.

The crowd had pretty well thinned out and the barkeep owner was busy polishing glasses. He stared in amazement as Hatfield entered.

"Who in blazes have you got there?" the saloon man asked. Then his face showed recognition. "Why, it's Hang High!" he exclaimed. "What happened to him?"

"Found him in his kitchen with his head split open," Hatfield explained. "Is there a doctor anywhere near?"

"Doc Cooper's office is right around the corner," replied the barkeep. "I'll show yuh. Take over, Sam," he directed an assistant, and hurried from behind the bar.

They routed out the white-bearded old frontier doctor. Barefooted and clad in a long nightshirt, he gave the patient a swift examination.

"No fracture," was his verdict. "Just knocked cold. He'll be comin' out of it in a minute."

He deftly stitched up and bandaged the wound, and applied restoratives. A little later the Chinese opened his black eyes and stared dazedly about. Doc Cooper continued to work on him until he had completely regained his faculties.

"You'll do now, Hang," he decided at length. "Outside of a headache, yuh'll be rarin' to go. What happened to yuh?"

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

"Was countin' day's money," replied the Chinese. "Man with black cloth over face come in kitchen. He smackee with gun. No catchee anything else."

"Robbery, I reckon," grunted the doctor. "This dad-busted town is gettin' worse by the day. Ain't nobody safe any more, and I can't get a wink of sleep."

"Doctorin' can't be as bad as the liquor business," the Big Enough owner interpolated sadly. "Nothin' could be worse'n that."

"Yuh ain't got nothin' to complain about, Hardwinter Burns," growled Doc. "Yuh're gettin' rich faster'n a packrat in a nail keg!"

"I'll never live to spend it," Hardwinter returned gloomily. "Not with all this promiscuous shootin'. Yuh can expect me to be carried in here feet first any day now, Doc."

"Uh-huh, if yuh start drinkin' any of that tarantuler juice yuh set before the customers," Doc growled. "Now get the blazes out of here, all of yuh, and let me get some sleep before somethin' else busts loose. You can walk all right, can't yuh, Hang?"

"Can do," replied the Chinaman, after a tentative step or two. Hatfield linked arms with him, and they left the office together, Hardwinter Burns trailing gloomily behind.

Back in the restaurant kitchen, Hang High opened the table drawer and glanced at the coins stacked inside.

"No steal anything," he announced. He regarded Hatfield questioningly from his beady eyes.

In a few terse sentences, the Ranger told him what had happened. Hang High nodded gravely, and again scrutinized the Ranger keenly.

"Seem somebody want kill you," he remarked. "That why they come in thlough kitchen. Know flont do' locked. Want to get up steps, wait."

"But how would they know I was up there?" Hatfield demurred. "I didn't tell anybody I was goin' to sleep here."

"Men eatee in lestlant when you lentee loom," Hang High reminded him.

HATFIELD nodded. He remembered that there were several other diners in the restaurant at the time, but none had attracted his particular attention. His eyes turned coldly gray as he recalled the events of the evening.

"Looks like that Brocas coyote, or some of his hands, are mebbe holdin' grudges," he mused later, as he sat in his windowless room cleaning his guns before going to bed. "Well, anyhow, I'll know who to keep an eye on from now. Nice nest of sidewinders I've holed up with."

After his Colts were again in satisfactory condition, he went to bed and slept soundly until sunrise. . . .

The following morning, Hatfield strolled about Mota and explored the town. The buildings of the coal mine interested him. They were tightly constructed and well cared for. He gazed with appreciation at the huge and well situated tipple, the efficient pumping station and the housing of the winding engine which drew the cages from the deep shaft. With approval he noted the long line of capacious bins built on a slant of the hillside directly above the already graded right-of-way which would soon accommodate the tracks of the railroad spur which was even now nearing completion. The bins were heaped high with mined coal.

"That Wainwright feller is smart," he decided. "Didn't wait for the cars to be run under his tipple to start operations. With that coal already stored, all he has to do is open the chutes of the bins and begin loading. He'll have trains out of here just as soon as the rails are laid and cars run in. Yes, he knows his business. Thousands of tons are in those bins."

He noted that a number of the bins contained lustrously black lumps which he recognized as the valuable cannel-coal, which would command high prices in Eastern markets.

"Feller had ought to make some money," he mused. "I've a notion this is the beginning of a fine new industry for Texas. Lots of coal in Texas, but so far it's hardly been developed at all. We need such things here, to bolster up stock raising. Cattle and sheep ranching are fine, but they don't provide work enough for all the people we need, to get the best from this state. Things like this are what we need. Yes, Wainwright is doing a fine thing for the community, and folks who think otherwise need their heads examined."

Repairing to the Big Enough, he questioned "Hardwinter" Burns, who had just come on the job, as to the best way to reach the Bar A ranch.

"That busted bridge ain't been all fixed yet, but there's a ford across the river about a mile to the east of the bridge," Hardwinter replied. "Be careful crossin' that ford, though. It's narrow, and the water on each side is almighty deep. Right now the stream's at high water, and the current runs like a scared jackrabbit. Be plumb careful not to slip off and get caught in the wash, because yuh'd be liable to wake up with wings and nightshirt, twangin' on the strings of a golden harp. Gorge is deep to the west, too, which don't make things any better. You be mighty careful if yuh take that ride. After yuh cross the river, just follow the trail up from the ford to the main road what runs about three miles east of the west hills. It heads straight up the valley and passes close to Audley's ranchhouse—the second house yuh'll see after leavin' the river."

While Hardwinter was talking, two men

entered the saloon and sat down at a nearby table. They were deeply engrossed in conversation and apparently oblivious of their surroundings.

"The little one is Harrison Wainwright, who owns the coal mine," observed Hardwinter. "The other feller is Wood Kirchner. Nice lookin' feller, ain't he? He is a minin' engineer and manages the mine for Wainwright. He's from back East—Pennsylvania—so I heard."

Hatfield studied the two men. Wainwright was a sprightly little man with a whimsical expression. His face was ugly, with all the features askew, but it was the kind of ugliness that warms the heart and instinctively draws people to its possessor. Hatfield liked the quirkings at the corners of his alarmingly wide mouth, and the grin wrinkles about his twinkling black eyes.

Kirchner was a tall, broad-shouldered and strikingly handsome man who seemed to be an habitual smiler. He had a straight nose, keen gray eyes and a well formed mouth. A wavy mane of tawny hair swept back from his broad forehead. His movements were graceful and assured. His voice was soft and drawling, at variance with Wainwright's clipped accents and staccato exclamations.

WAINWRIGHT wore store clothes, but Kirchner was garbed in a flannel shirt open at his muscular throat, corduroy trousers and high, laced boots. Wainwright was apparently unarmed, but Kirchner wore a heavy gun swinging low at his left hip.

"Looks like fellers who can make a business go," Hatfield decided.

A little later he left the saloon, walked to the livery stable and got the saddle on Goldy.

"Might as well amble up to that Bar A spread," he told the sorrel. "If we can get a job of ridin' up there, it'll give us an excuse for hangin' out in this part of the country for a spell. I got to have an excuse for stayin' here and one more driftin' cowboy earnin' his bed and board oughtn't to attract much attention."

Leaving the town he rode slowly until he sighted the river. The main trail led to the bridge, upon which the workmen were busy repairing the damage of ten days before. Hatfield turned aside where the trail forked and sent Goldy loping along parallel to the river bank. He was perhaps a thousand yards from where the trail turned down the steep bank to the ford when he observed a rider approaching the ford on the far bank of the river. He saw the horse take the water and start cautiously across. The water rose rapidly until it was just under the animal's middle.

The horse seemed nervous. Hatfield could see it toss its head and slug the bit, and its progress grew slower and slower. At midstream it stopped, started forward again at the rider's urging, slipped, skittered and, an instant later, plunged clear under.

"Stepped off the ford!" Hatfield muttered, quickening Goldy's pace. He stared apprehensively, saw the plunging animal break surface, minus its rider. An instant later he caught the glint of a white face a score of yards farther down stream. Almost instantly it went under again, reappeared with all the evidence of violent struggling.

Hatfield jerked Goldy to a halt.

"Blazes!" he muttered. "That feller can't swim!"

Even as he spoke, he saw the helpless form rolling over and over in the grip of the current.

Without a moment's waste of time, Hatfield swung to the ground. He jerked loose his heavy double cartridge belts and hung them over the saddle horn. His broad-brimmed hat joined them. He did not dare take time to remove his boots.

"Hold it, Goldy!" he ordered, and went down the bank in a sliding run. The run ended in a streaking dive far out into the roily water.

As he broke surface he got another fleeting glimpse of the helpless form rushing downstream.

Then the current gripped him, and it ran like a millrace.

With all his iron strength, Jim Hatfield fought the swirling river. He took a long diagonal downstream and toward the opposite bank, a course that should enable him to intercept the drowning victim of the stream. It would be touch and go, he knew. The turning form was rushing downstream at prodigious speed, and it seemed to Hatfield that, powerful swimmer though he was, he was making little headway against the rush of the waters.

But as the river swept around the bend above the bridge, the power of the current lessened somewhat. What was more, it developed an eddy that tended to sweep him toward the center of the stream. The point of the triangle which would be formed by himself and the person he hoped to rescue developed swiftly, the angle between them narrowing with rapidity as the eddy swept him outward. With a final desperate effort he made it. The turning form was within arm's length. He reached out, gripped a shirt collar and held on. An instant later and he was able to support the other's head above water.

Overhead loomed the incompleted span of the bridge. To his ears, faintly above the roar of the water, came excited shouts from the workmen there, and from others on the bank. He saw three mounted men whirl their horses and race downstream. Then the full force of the current caught him again and whirled him toward the deep gorge to the west.

MADLY Hatfield fought the sweep of the waters. For hundreds of yards he did not seem to gain a foot. The opposite bank, which was now the nearer of the two, seemed far away indeed. Grimly he battled the rushing current, and the diminishing eddy, which now tended to sweep him back to midstream. Slowly, slowly he drew near the shelving bank, which was steadily increasing in height. The tug and haul of the helpless burden he supported was such that even his iron strength was beginning to fail. He went under, came up gasping for air, went under again, swam for some distance beneath the water, and came up with his lungs bursting. The water was cold.

A thin, rosy mist was forming before his eyes. It was shot and veined with coruscating sparkles which were followed by waves of blackness. In his ears was a thunderous roaring. About his chest was a hot iron band that drew tighter and tighter. He went under again, and upon him seemed to be a terrible weight that forced him down and down. He tensed for a mighty effort, plunged forward, rose, was forced down once more. The roaring was now the crashing of disintegrating worlds. The rosy mist had changed to a bloody froth curdled with blackness. Tighter and tighter was that fiery band about his chest. He swam with the desperation of despair, his fingers clamped rigidly in their grip upon the dragging burden. He went down again, and with a surge of utter relief, felt his feet strike bottom. A dozen more feeble strokes, an instinctive scramble and flounder, and he was crawling up a sloping bank through shallow water, dragging the rescued behind him. A moment later and he sank gasping and exhausting on a little stretch of sandy beach. He gulped great draughts of sweet air into his tortured lungs, felt the invigorating warmth of the sunshine pouring down from the blue sky. Shaking his head to clear it of cobwebs, he sat up.

His first thought was for the near-victim of the river. With swiftly returning strength he picked up the slight form that lay, face downward, on the sand beside him. Then he stiffened, staring with wide eyes.

The chin-strap of the broad-brimmed "J. B." had broken, the hat fell off and over Hatfield's supporting arm tumbled a wealth of bright hair the color of ripe corn silk. Even the drenching it had undergone could not altogether straighten the curl that gave it a tendency to wanton about the shapely little head. Below the yellow hair was a broad, low forehead, a straight little nose delicately powdered with a few freckles, a sweetly curved mouth and a round, little chin. The form he cradled in his arms was slender and softly rounded.

"Good gosh!" the Ranger stuttered. "A—a girl!"

CHAPTER VI

Friend and Enemy

FOR a moment of dread, the Ranger wondered if he had been too late in his attempt at rescue. But even as he stared at her white face, a faint touch of color began stealing into her pallid cheeks. The soft lips slowly incarnadined, quivered, parted slightly. Then the black lace of her long lashes lifted and wide, wondering blue eyes stared up into his. She struggled slightly in his arms, relaxed.

He held her for a moment, then lifted her to a sitting position.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

She raised a little sun-golden hand and passed it dazedly across her forehead.

"Y-yes," she said at length, her voice low and throaty. "I'm— I'm not drowned?"

"Not quite." Hatfield chuckled. "But yuh came mighty near it, ma'am. For a minute I thought yuh were done for."

The girl stared at him. "I remember, now," she said slowly. "I remember seeing you dive into the river. That's the last thing I do remember."

"It's all over, and yuh came through okay," he replied. "Yore horse slipped off the ford, didn't he?"

"Yes. He must have stepped in a hole. It's narrow there in the middle. My head hit his as I fell off. It dazed me for the moment."

"Don't see any signs of a bruise," Hatfield comforted her. "Reckon it wasn't much of a lick."

The girl shook her wet hair. "You saved me," she said simply. "Thank you."

She extended her hand, and they shook gravely. "I'm Marie Brocas," she said.

Hatfield supplied his own name. "Any relation to a feller named Clate Brocas?" he asked.

"He's my father! Do you know him?"

"Wee—ell, I sorta of ran into him in town last night," Hatfield replied, and did not elaborate the remark.

"He'll want to thank you, too," the girl said. "I'm his only child. My mother died when I was still a baby. It would have broken his heart if anything had happened to me."

"That sounds natural, now that you mention it," Hatfield agreed cheerfully. "Outside of a wetting, I reckon you ain't much harmed. I'll try and dry yuh out a bit."

He pulled off her riding boots and emptied them of water, and helped her wring the water from her clothes. Then he performed a like office for himself. He was just drawing on his boots once more when a shout sound-

ed from the bank above. Glancing up he saw three men reining in their foaming horses on the crest. They stared at the pair on the river's edge, then sent their horses skittering down the sag.

The instant they reached the bottom, the foremost rider flung himself from the saddle and rushed to the girl, his eyes wide with apprehension.

"Marie!" he exclaimed. "Are yuh all right?" Before she had time to reply he gathered her in his arms and held her close. She clung to him for a moment, then freed herself, her cheeks hot with blushes. She cast Hatfield a timid glance.

"I'm all right, Jack—thanks to this brave man," she replied.

Jim Hatfield smiled down at them from his great height, his teeth flashing startlingly white against his bronzed cheeks, his stern face wonderfully pleasant.

"Howdy, Audley?" he greeted. "Reckon that was you I saw ride away from the bridge as we came past. Took yuh quite a spell to get here. We made the trip a heap faster."

"We—we had to cut around a wash," stuttered Audley. He stared at Hatfield, then abruptly held out his hand.

"Feller, last night I was in yore debt, but I didn't know the half of it then!" he said.

They shook hands. Hatfield glanced up the bank. "Suppose we amble up top-side, where the sun's hotter," he suggested.

They scrambled up the bank, Audley and the two cowboys who had accompanied him, and whom Hatfield recalled from the evening before as Cal Whittaker and Wes Hartsook, leading their horses. Reaching the crest, Audley mounted and swung Marie Brocas up in front of him, where she appeared perfectly comfortable.

"Cal's horse will carry double," he told Hatfield. "It ain't over far to the ford. Marie's horse managed to make the shore right below the bridge. Reckon they're holdin' him for her up there."

THEY rode back along the bank, detoured the wide wash a little farther up, and paused at the bridge to catch the girl's mount, which appeared none the worse for his experience. Then they proceeded to the ford.

"I was going to visit a friend in town. I can get dry clothes from her," the girl told Audley.

"Yuh're not crossin' that ford without me," the young rancher declared firmly.

"All right, Jack, but you mustn't ride into town with me," Hatfield heard her reply in low tones.

"Where were yuh headin' for, Hatfield?" Audley asked the Lone Wolf as they paused at the ford.

"Was amblin' up to yore place," Hatfield replied.

"Wait for me and I'll ride along with yuh," Audley told him. "That is unless yuh'd rather go back to town for a change."

"This hot sun will dry me off quick enough," Hatfield replied. "I'm steamin' right now."

"Keno!" Audley nodded, glancing at the far bank. "I'll bring yore horse back with me after I take Marie across."

Hatfield smiled slightly. Pursing his lips, he whistled a clear, sweet note. Goldy, on the far bank and some distance down stream, pricked his ears forward, shook his head and trotted up the trail. Reaching the ford, he sniffed the water once, then stepped daintily out upon the sunken ridge. Without haste or nervousness he crossed the stream, shook himself free of the drops that clung to his glistening coat, and paused beside Hatfield glancing at him inquiringly.

"That's sure a fine trained horse," Audley declared. "And I bet he's got speed, too."

"Reckon he has," Hatfield admitted, stroking the glossy neck. He retrieved his hat and cartridge belts from where they hung on the saddle horn and donned them.

"Be waitin' here for yuh," he told Audley. "Adios, Miss, and learn to swim before yuh dive in next time. Makes it a heap more comfortable."

"But perhaps not so thrilling, under the circumstances," she replied demurely. "Hasta luega!"

"'Until we meet again'!" Hatfield translated her farewell as she rode into the water. He gazed after the pair.

"Feller plumb sweet on the girl, and plumb on the prod against her father," he mused under his breath, apropos of John Audley. "Now is that a mess!" . . .

Later, Hatfield and Audley rode up the valley together. Ahead of them, the two young cowboys raced their horses, whooping and skylarking. Audley smiled as he watched them.

"A good sample of my men," he remarked. "They're all like that—tophands, but reckless, young, and irresponsible. They can do anything with a horse or a rope, or a gun, but they need somebody to hold them down all the time. To them, punchin' cows is about as much fun as work. Which is fine, in its way, but not the best thing to keep a ranch runnin' smoothly, and payin'. Tom Graham, my foreman, who got drowned when that bridge was blowed up, was older and steadier. Tom could hold 'em in line, but since he is gone I haven't anybody to depend on. I can't give all my time to keepin' an eye on them."

He paused, looking contemplative. "Yuh say yuh're sorta at lose ends right now?" he asked. Hatfield nodded.

"How about signin' up as foreman with me for a spell? Roundup time is right ahead and I'll need somebody bad. I pay the regular wages."

Hatfield considered. "Might do worse, I reckon," he replied at length. "Guess yuh've hired a hand."

"Fine!" Audley exclaimed. "I sized yuh up for a tophand first time I looked yuh over. Reckon yuh've had considerable experience in the cow business, eh? Owner perhaps?"

"I was raised on a ranch," Hatfield admitted. "My Paw owned a spread, but rustlers just about ruined him. Then a couple of dry summers and bad winters put him out of business. Been workin' for others ever since."

He did not consider it necessary to explain that the elder Hatfield's death had occurred during young Jim's third year in a great college of engineering, which happening had caused Jim Hatfield to abandon his contemplated career and enter the Rangers, where he had been ever since, building the reputation that made the Lone Wolf a name universally respected and honored throughout the Southwest wherever honest men got together, and correspondingly feared and hated by outlaws and law-breakers of Texas and other parts.

DURING the years that had passed since Hatfield left college, he had kept up his studies and had never lost his interest in the field of engineering, having found his knowledge of the subject extremely useful at various times during the course of his Ranger career.

"Too bad yuh lost the ranch," Audley remarked sympathetically. "Reckon a thing like that sort of tends to set a feller to ridin' lone trails. But if yuh should take a notion to settle down, yuh couldn't do better than to settle down right here in the San Benito. No better range in Texas, and unless I'm a heap mistaken, this section is goin' to be a lot more valuable later on. Some folks don't think so, but with the comin' in of railroadin' and minin' the cow business is sure due to boom. A lot of stubborn gents hereabouts have got the notion that it will be bad for us, but they're plumb wrong. What this country needs is more people. Mighty few folks have any notion how really rich and wonderful it is. Why, for hundreds of years folks have ridden past those hill over there and never looked on 'em as anythin' but a darned nuisance. Nobody, until Harrison Wainwright found coal where nobody else ever thought of such a thing. No tellin' what else somebody might find."

"No other mineral discoveries in them?"

"None so far, and no signs anybody has ever hit on. No gold or silver along the beds of the streams, what few there is, no dust or nuggets in the sands. But yuh never can tell. Might be somethin' worth while hid there. I always had a notion my old father suspected there was something plumb valuable here in the Espantosas. Mebbe all his talk about the valleys givin' cows good protection durin' blizzards was due to somethin' else he had in mind. He wasn't talkative, the Old Man, but he did a heap of thinkin'."

Hatfield gazed at the forbidding loom of the dark and rugged hills. If they held a secret, he felt, they had kept it well.

"Espantosa—haunted," he translated the Spanish word. "Well, they look it."

A little later they turned aside where a trim little white ranchhouse sat a few hundred yards off the trail in a grove of oaks that afforded a grateful shade. As they did so, Audley waved his hand to the northwest.

"Over there is the Cross C, Clate Brocas' holdin's," he said. "It's the best and biggest ranch in the section. Clate's folks have held it for more than one hundred years. Inherited it from a Spanish ancestor who got it from the Spanish King by way of a royal grant. All this valley was Spanish holdin's, once. That's why most of the titles here are said to be shaky. Other cattlemen in the valley with the exception of the Bar A, might have a tough time provin' they own legal water rights. That's why the boys are so touchy about nesters. They ain't sure of their titles if it should come to a real court fight."

"The Texas courts have upheld those Spanish grant titles before now," Hatfield reminded him.

"Uh-huh," Audley admitted, "but not always. Anyhow, it worries the cowmen. Besides, nesters have a habit of runnin' in sheep. And yuh know what that means in cow country. It might result in a bloody war bustin' loose."

Hatfield nodded gravely. He recalled terrible struggles between sheepmen and cattlemen in which many persons had lost their lives.

"We can do without a range war," he said. "How do you know yore own title is sound?"

"My father was a mighty shrewd man," Audley replied. "Yep, he had plenty wrinkles on his horns. He wasn't satisfied with his grant title, so he put out some good money and bought his land from the state. Lawyers over to the capital told him they doubted if it was necessary, except for the section runin' up into the hills, but the old gent didn't take any chances and planked down enough dinero to cover everything. So if it ever happens by any chance that the courts should overturn the water rights in this valley open range, it won't affect my ranch."

Hatfield nodded again. He saw, now, how Audley could afford to be independent. He saw, too, that this young cattleman, apparently alone of the residents of the valley, not only had vision and faith in the future, but also the wisdom to prepare for the future

while there was still time.

"We've mighty nigh got a trail herd ready to run into town for the mine," Audley told him as they sat down to supper in the big ranchhouse kitchen. "The bridge will be back in shape in a couple of days, now, and as soon as it is, we'll shove 'em along."

CHAPTER VII

Trouble at the Crossing

EARLY the following morning, Hatfield took charge of the work of getting the trail herd ready. He looked over the ground, watched the cowboys at work. After a while he called Cal Whittaker and Wes Hartsook aside.

"A mangana de cabra is a mighty pretty throw," he told Whittaker. "But catching a beef by the neck and forefeet while he's on the run, swappin' ends with him and bustin' him on hard ground is liable to crack a leg, and a leg-busted steer isn't much account in a drive. Every one with a strained shoulder cuts down the drive, and that isn't much good. Suppose yuh try straight ropin' for a change. It'll be good for the Boss' bank account. And, Hartsook, yuh look sort of nice settin' yore bronk easy-like and whoopin' and swingin' yore hat, but racin' a beef at a dead-run for a half-a-mile runs quite a few pounds of meat off it, and meat is what the buyer pays for. Don't yuh think it would be a good idea to drop a loop on 'em where yuh find 'em, when droppin' a loop is necessary?"

The two young punchers bristled at the reproof, but a look into Hatfield's level green eyes decided them that little would be got by argument. Instead, they grinned sheepishly, and promised to do better, and kept their promise. The word was passed along that the new foreman "knowed his business and won't stand for any foolishness." Consequently, under Hatfield's supervision, the work of getting the herd together rapidly progressed.

"We can shove 'em along tomorrow," Audley told him a couple of days later. "They were puttin' the finishin' touches on the bridge when I rode across this afternoon. Yuh all set?"

Hatfield nodded. A little later he called two of the steadier cowboys to him.

"Ever ride night herd on a bridge?" he asked them without preamble.

They stared at him, shook their heads in bewilderment.

"Well, yuh're startin' tonight." Hatfield told them, with a quick grin. "As soon as yuh've eaten, I want yuh to saddle up and hightail for that bridge. One on one side of the river, the other on the other, and I want yuh to see anything that might go on there between now and mornin'. Stay on the job till the herd shows up. I'll see to it that yuh get double pay for the chore. And take yore saddleguns along, and remember what they're good for."

The cowboys nodded their understanding. With grins of understanding they made their preparations for guarding the bridge approaches during the dark hours.

"Our new ramrod don't let no grass grow up high enough to trickle his cinch," one remarked to his bunky as they rode off.

"That's so," agreed the other. "And I've a hunch Clate Brocas and his hellions are due for something they won't like before he's done with 'em! I'd as soon give a mountain lion first hold in a wrestlin' match as to tangle with him. Yep, he'll do to ride the river with." Which was about as high a compliment as the West could pay a man, as any cowboy who ever shoved a herd of longhorns across a swollen stream very well knows.

With the first light of dawn the trail rolled southward down the valley. In addition to point and lead men, Hatfield assigned hands to outrider duty. These rode a mile or so on either side of the herd, watchful, alert, rifles across their saddlebows. Contrary to usual practice, two men rode in advance of the herd, scanning thickets and groves, keeping a watchful eye on the glowering hills to the right.

"No use taking any chances," Hatfield told Audley. "I don't expect trouble, but it's when yuh don't expect it that it hits, at least, such has been my experience. We'll just act accordin', and be ready for anything."

"I wouldn't put anything past Clate Brocas and his amigos," Audley growled in reply. "Not after that bridge dynamitin'."

Hatfield regarded him curiously. "Yuh really figger, then, Brocas was responsible for that?"

"Who else?" Audley instantly countered. "What feller gives a cuss whether the Imperial Company gets beef or not? Brocas warned me I'd be sorry if I tried to ship. Warned me the very day it happened. Who else would have done it?"

"Don't know," Hatfield admitted. "But somehow or other Brocas didn't strike me as the kind of a longhorn who would go in for any kind of drygulchin'. A fighter, and a hard one, yes—but, I'd say, a straight from the shoulder fighter who wouldn't hit from behind. Mebbe I'm wrong, but I can't help feelin' that way."

AUDLEY'S face became gloomy. "Hope yuh're right, for reasons yuh may be able to guess," he replied. "But once again I say, if it wasn't Brocas, who was it?"

"That remains to be found out," Hatfield replied. "Yuh got any enemies hereabouts?"

"None I ever heerd tell of, that is until I

signed my contract with the Imperial," Audley returned.

Hatfield said no more for the moment, but his black brows drew together until the concentration furrow was deep between them, a sure sign that the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking. Despite his remarks to Audley, he couldn't help but recall the treacherous attempt on his own life the night he had the run-in with Brocas and his men.

"Just the same kind of deviltry as that rattlesnake note business back in Franklin," he mused.

Instinctively he touched the pocket wherein was stored the lethal drawings in the waterproof pouch. He had examined them carefully the night after his ducking in the river, but the pouch had proved its worth. The sheets had not even been damp.

"Mebbe I was plumb wrong about layin' that drygulchin' in the restaurant to Brocas," he suddenly told himself. "Mebbe the murderous sneak who sent those drawings found out where I was going and trailed me to Mota. Could be. That would clear Brocas, all right, but it shore wouldn't explain who is trying to cut the ground from under Audley. Yep, I reckon Senor Brocas will still stand some watchin', even if he doesn't look the part. Appearances are sometimes deceiving."

When they reached a point about a mile north of the bridge, Hatfield and Audley, who were riding some distance in front of the herd, saw the two punchers who had been assigned to guard the approaches during the night riding swiftly toward them.

"Trouble, Boss," one called as soon as they were within hailing distance. "Everything peaceful durin' the night, but a little while ago, three gents with Winchesters come ridin' across from Mota and bedded down at this end. They told us it had cost a heap to repair the bridge and that the county commissioners had decided to charge toll on every head of beef crossin', until the money was rounded up. They said they was sent over to do the collectin'. We didn't know hardly what to say to that, and thought we'd better rustle back and let you call the play."

Audley began to sputter, but Hatfield laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Suppose we ride down there and get a line on the deal before goin' off half-cocked," he suggested. "Take it easy, now. Let the herd catch up."

"This is some more of Brocas' smart doin's!" growled Audley. "He's on the commission—he is the commission. He runs it any dang way he wants to. The rest of 'em don't amount to shucks."

Together they rode to the bridgehead, the herd rolling close behind them. They quickly saw that the two punchers had spoken truth. Standing before the approach were three men armed with rifles, one a few paces in front of his companions.

Hatfield and Audley dismounted and walked toward them. A few paces distant, and the foremost man raised his rifle.

"That'll be close enough," he growled.

Hatfield halted. He was already quite close to the man—as close as Jim Hatfield ever needed to get to any man who might make a threatening move.

"What's this all about, anyhow?" demanded Audley.

"Nothin', except the commissioners has ordered folks who use the bridge to pay toll until the repair work is paid for," the man replied.

Audley controlled his temper with evident difficulty. "What's the toll?" he asked. "How much per head?"

Grinning, the man named the price. Audley swore an outraged oath.

"But that's ridiculous!" he protested. "That's as much as a head is worth!"

The watchman continued to grin, a grin which was mirrored on the faces of his two companions.

"Reckon that ain't no lookout of ours," he replied. "It's something for you to bother about. We're just here to collect, and we aims to do it, or not a hoof crosses over."

Hatfield spoke for the first time. His voice was deceptively mild.

"Are you gents deputy sheriffs, or county officials?"

The man squinted at him suspiciously. "What difference does that make to you?" he demanded.

"It might make considerable," Hatfield replied, his voice still mild. "Have you got a badge or a court order that means anything?"

"No, we ain't," the man growled truculently. "But that don't matter a hang."

JIM HATFIELD moved like the flickering shadow of a lightning flash. His long arm shot out, jerked the rifle from the man's grasp and with a single movement tossed the weapon away. Then he gripped the astounded man and whirled him about in front as a shield. The man's companions yelped with alarm and flung up their rifles only to stiffen, staring, with their mouths open. Over the captive's shoulder yawned a black gun muzzle, and back of that muzzle were the icy eyes of the Lone Wolf.

Hatfield spoke again, his voice no longer mild, but edged with steel.

"Drop those rifles! Turn around, pronto! Right! Now head back the way yuh come from, and if yuh can't keep ahead of these beefs on the way across, why, take to the river!"

He shoved his captive violently after the pair, and his voice rose in thunder to the waiting point men:

"All right, boys! shove 'em along, and

shove 'em fast!"

Chuckling, he watched the three demoralized toll collectors racing at a dead run across the bridge, the goaded, angry steers thundering at their heels.

"But what will the commissioners say?" Audley wondered anxiously as the last of the herd, the drag riders whooping behind them, streamed onto the bridge.

"They won't say anything, yuh can bet yore last peso on that," Hatfield replied, still chuckling. "Yuh think they want to make themselves the laughin' stock of the whole valley? Chances are they won't even admit havin' anything to do with it. Their clever little scheme swapped ends, that's all. They bungled it when they didn't have those horned toads sworn in as deputy sheriffs or something of the kind. Yuh see, only a deputy sheriff or other duly accredited county official would have the legal right to collect toll on a county owned or operated bridge. Fact is, it's mighty doubtful if their ordinance would stand up in a court test. Unless I'm a heap mistaken, it takes a state legislative act to authorize toll collection on any bridge or road in the state. Chances are the commissioners knew that well enough, but they figgered they could hold you up, delay yuh mebbe for days while yuh went to court to fight it out with them. Yep, a rather shrewd trick. Just one thing wrong with it. It didn't work!

"I'm willin' to bet yuh won't hear a word about it," he added as they walked their horses onto the bridge.

Which proved to be the truth.

CHAPTER VIII

Crazy Water

BRISKLY they shoved the herd through the town and into the mining companys' yard. The cowboys headed for the nearest saloon to wash the dust from their throats. Hatfield and Audley repaired to the mine office, where they were enthusiastically greeted by the voluble, little owner, Harrison Wainwright.

"Just in time!" chirped Wainwright. "We were clean out of beef. You can't mine coal without beef, and plenty of it. These fellers I got here digging out coal must have their wine and their red meat, or they ain't worth a hoot. And the railroad is still two weeks off, mebbe more. You're ace high, Audley."

"Yuh better thank Hatfield instead of me," Audley replied. "If it hadn't been for him, we'd still be stuck the other side of the bridge, mebbe for a week."

"How's that?" demanded Wainwright.

Audley briefly recounted the happenings at the bridge. Wainwright shook his head in dismay.

"I can't understand those people," he complained. "They just can't seem to realize what's good for them. No, such stupidity is too much for me."

"I'm commencin' to believe they don't understand themselves," grunted Audley. "Mebbe they'll get over it."

"I certainly hope so," agreed the mine owner.

Through an open door Hatfield could see a much larger room which accommodated a long table littered with retorts, furnaces, racks of test tubes and other scientific paraphernalia. At this table a man was busy working.

"That's my manager, Mr. Kirchner," said Wainwright, noting the direction of Hatfield's gaze. "Come in and meet him."

The smiling Kirchner shook hands with Hatfield. "We do things in a scientific way here," he explained. "I was just making some tests. The output of every drift is tested at least once a week for quality. That way, we know just what we are doing all the time. Too many operators got the hit-and-miss way, and lose money. Here we know just what we're bringing out, and the buyer knows just what he's getting. Take this, for instance." He held up a shining black lump. "This is cannel coal—high quality. Some operators dump stuff like this in with the rest of their product. That's senseless. Back where I come from, mine owners have learned to be more careful and prosper accordingly. It's criminal to shove high-grade fuel coal like this into a locomotive firebox. The Imperial Company sorts it out and will ship it East when the cars start rollin'."

"Yuh're from the East?" Hatfield asked him curiously.

"I'm a Pennsylvanian. First time West. Like it out here, though. Fine country—plenty of opportunity, particularly for men willing to take a chance, such as Mr. Wainwright. You'll excuse me, gentlemen? Got more work to do."

"He's smart," whispered Wainwright, when they had returned to the outer office. "I was lucky to get a highly certificated engineer like him. I've an idea, though, he's rather restless and likes to be on the move. Has an impatient nature. Always taking long rides through the hills on his off time, when other men would be taking it easy after working so hard. Never neglects a thing, though. Don't know what I would do without him."

"Seems competent, all right," Hatfield agreed in thoughtful tones.

Wainwright nodded emphatically, glancing with approval at the busy figure at the long table.

"I was just going to ride to the railroad rail-head, to see how they are coming out

there," he said. "Would you gentlemen like to join me?"

"Reckon we might find it interestin'," answered Audley. "What do yuh say, Jim?"

Hatfield signified that he was agreeable. Wainwright procured his horse from a nearby livery stable and the three men set out.

A mile or so beyond the outskirts of the town, they encountered a gang of trackmen busy preparing the grade of the right-of-way, which was some miles ahead of the steel. The workers glanced up curiously as the three riders trotted past, and then continued their work.

Wainwright waved his hand toward the south.

"The railroad builds for the future," he announced. "They know the present mine is but the first of several soon to be in operation. Five miles south of here, just beyond the present rail-head, they are constructing a distributing yard at a favorable location. There the shipments of coal, and cattle and other products also, for that matter, will be assembled and properly routed. That will save time and work and expedite proper shipping."

THE young mine owner's brow darkened with worry.

"I'm anxious about the speed they're making," he added a moment later. "I have notes falling due very shortly that can be met only with the money I'll receive from my shipments. I've just about scraped the bottom of the barrel so far as ready cash is concerned, and my credit is strained to the breaking point. But now the worst seems to be over. It's strange how quickly things change."

"That's right," said Hatfield, with a smile. "I'm glad luck's breakin' yore way at last. Folks had been tellin' me how hard you've worked."

"That's the trouble with starting an enterprise of this nature with small initial capital," said Wainright. "Expenses always run above what you estimate in the beginning. The boys who are in this mining project with me aren't too well lined, financially, and we've had to do a lot of scratching to keep things moving. We'll be all right as soon as the wheels begin to turn!" His face brightened with optimism. "The railroad will be a heavy buyer from the start, and the better grades of coal we are getting will bring good prices at other markets. The only thing bothering me now is possible delay. I can't stand that."

He relapsed into meditative silence and for some distance they rode without conversation. Ahead, the yard and the rail-head began taking form through the clear desert air.

"Be there in another fifteen minutes," remarked Audley.

Jim Hatfield was studying the scene ahead.

"That's queer," he commented. "I don't see any smoke."

"By George, I don't either!" exclaimed Wainright, rising in his stirrups. "That is odd. There are half a dozen switch engines scattered over the yards all the time, and a couple of work trains, and there are always material trains standing on the main line waiting to be unloaded. Wonder what it means?"

"Engines in the yards, all right," said Hatfield a little later. "I can make them out, now."

"And there's a material train standing on the mainline," added Audley. "Unless I'm a heap mistaken, there's another one, a long one, standing behind the first one. And not a bit of smoke from any of the engines. What in blazes is goin' on down there? Come on! Get a move on!"

The three urged their horses into a gallop and dashed forward at full speed.

The sight which met their eyes was indeed strange. Ponderous locomotives stood motionless on the rails. But no plume of smoke or gush of steam arose from their stacks. The stacks yawned to the sky like hungry mouths. The great machines had a dead and useless look about them. Strings of box and flat cars stood motionless on sidings. There was none of the busy activity usually to be observed about a yard and a construction project.

A few minutes later the three riders raced past the rail-head. A work train stood with its foremost flat car resting on the last rails laid. It was loaded with steel, but otherwise unoccupied. Anxiously they hurried on until they reached the yards, where a curious scene met their eyes.

Groups of workmen stood or sat about, smoking, chatting, but otherwise idle. Not a wheel was turning. Not a hammer clanged. Not a single wrench screaked on a nut. A red-faced construction superintendent displayed the only sign of activity. He was striding up and down waving his arms and cursing. Nearby stood the locomotive of the foremost material train. The engineer, oilcan in hand, a contemplative expression on his face, regarded his silent charge.

Wainwright swung to the ground, as did his companions. "What in blazes is the matter, Jenkins?" he demanded of the construction superintendent.

"Water!" exploded the super. "This blasted desert water!"

"What's the matter with it?" demanded Wainwright, hopping up and down with excitement.

The super swore a weird oath, and brandished his fists. "It's foamin' in the boilers!" he said. "We've had to draw the fires from every injine in the yards, from the material trains, too. Yuh can't run an injine when

the water's foamin' up to the top of the steam dome and pourin' into the cylinders every time yuh open the throttle! We can't turn a wheel!"

"But what caused it, all of a sudden?" asked Jack Audley in bewildered tones.

"Gosh only knows," replied the super. "Yuh can't never explain nothin' in this dad-blamed desert country. All of a sudden they all started foamin', that's all I know. Yuh see," he explained, "there is a big tank built about fifteen miles south of here. It holds water from a spring, the only one between here and the junction. That tank supplies water for the yard injines, and every material train must stop there, too, to refill their tanks. Something went wrong with the water this mawnin', and all tarnation bruk loose as soon as it got to workin' in the boilers."

"I just managed to get here with my train," observed the locomotive engineer. "It fed into the cylinders faster than I could blow it out through the cylinder cocks. Another hundred yards and I guess I'd have knocked out a cylinder head, sure as blazes. There are half-a-dozen material trains stalled between here and the tank, all in the same shape."

"But what are you going to do?" Wainwright demanded of the super.

"We'll have to run water up here from the junction in tank cars," Jenkins replied. "Then we got to wash out every boiler and tank before we can put the injines back in use. Then I reckon we'll be forced to haul water from the junction for our tanks until we hit Mota and can run a water line from the river. We'll be delayed a week, mebbe more."

"You've already wired the junction for help?"

The super swore again.

"That's more trouble," he said. "I tried to wire, but the doggone wire is busted or somethin' somewhere, and I couldn't get through. I've got linemen goin' over it to find the break, and I sent on a handcar to the junction with the news, but it's one devil of a job pumpin' a hand car over sixty miles of this blazin' desert. Heaven only knows when they'll get in."

JIM HATFIELD was staring at the cylinder cocks of the "dead" locomotive. He noted that they were rimmed about with a white frost. Stooping, he poked the frothy crystals with a tentative finger. He tasted a minute fragment that clung to his nail, puckered his face wryly, and stood up.

"How do yuh get the water into the tank that supplies the engines?" he asked the super, speaking for the first time.

"It's pumped in," the other replied. "We got a pumpin' station at the spring."

"What powers the pumps?" Hatfield wanted to know.

"A stationary boiler, of course."

"Where does the boiler get its water? From the overhead tank?"

"Nope," replied the super. "It's piped direct from the spring. Why?"

Hatfield did not answer the question. Instead, he turned to the locomotive engineer.

"Was the pump goin' when you stopped to fill yore engine tank?" he asked.

"Yep," the other nodded. "It sure was."

"And when were the yard engines watered?" Hatfield asked Jenkins, the superintendent.

"Early this mornin', before work started on the line," he replied.

"Looks like the water doesn't affect the stationary boiler at the pumping station," Hatfield commented.

The super stared at him, jaw dropping.

"By George, that's so!" he exclaimed.

"Better start a gang of men for that tank, pronto," the Ranger went on. "Have them flush it out good and scrub the inside. Then fill it with fresh water from the spring. Get a locomotive up from the junction and pull the last material train back until you can wash out its engine-boiler at the pumping station. Then that engine can pull the next material train back and have the same thing done for its engine. After the material trains are cleaned up, you can have yore yard engines hauled back to the tank and taken care of. That'll save yuh about a week's time getting back to work."

"But—but what caused all this?" sputtered the super.

"The trouble isn't with the spring water," Hatfield explained. "It's in the tank. Yuh'll find it's been filled up with a caustic soda compound that makes the water foam." He gestured to the cylinder cocks.

"They're all coated with it," he indicated. "Yuh can taste the soda plain. Don't yuh see? If the spring water was bad, the stationary boiler at the pumping station would be affected also, and it isn't. The whole trouble is in the tank."

"But how in blazes did the stuff get into the tank?" Jenkins wanted to know.

"That remains to be found out," Hatfield replied grimly. "After yuh get the tank cleaned out, post a guard, day and night, there, with orders to shoot at anybody they see snoopin' around. Get busy!"

The superintendent, boss of half a hundred men, stared at the tall cowboy who had usurped all the authority in sight.

"Feller," he said, "I don't know who yuh are or where yuh come from, but yuh use yore head for somethin' else 'sides holdin' up yore hat!"

He whirled, and raced toward a line of camp cars, bellowing orders, and swearing until there was a blue halo about his red head.

Wainwright and Audley stared at Hatfield in wordless admiration.

"Gosh!" said Wainwright. "I don't know what in blazes we would do without you!"

"That low-down coyote Brocas!" swore Audley. "He's got a sight more savvy than I woulda ever give him credit for. Figgerin' out a trick like that!"

Hatfield said nothing, but the concentration furrow was deep between his black brows as they rode back to Mota.

CHAPTER IX

Slippery Villain

Oh, the beefs are fat and sassy,
Amblin' lazy in the sun,
And my cuttin' hoss and me are feelin' prime;
Oh, it's gals and cards and whisky,
Soon as shippin' days are done:
Come on, cowboy, shake a laig!
It's roundup time!

YOUNG Cal Whittaker sang lustily as the Bar A riders, Jim Hatfield at their head, rode swiftly up the San Benito Valley. For it was roundup time, and the various outfits of the valley were gathering for the most important work of the year.

Following the swiftly riding cowboys were wranglers with the remuda, the string of spare horses that would be used by the cowboys in the course of the arduous work. Last of all rumbled the ponderous chuck-wagon with its coonie, or cradle of rawhide stretched to the running gear beneath the bed, where wood for fuel was carried, also the punchers' bed-rolls. Inside the wagon, where the cook reigned supreme, were provisions, cooking utensils, Dutch ovens and other necessities.

A site on the north range of the Cross C, near the Bar A boundary had been selected for the main holding spot of the roundup herd, where steers of both ranches were to be exchanged. This was a point about midway up the valley and was favorably located for other reasons. The Cross C foreman, Mark Brock, a big, heavy-shouldered man with long and thick arms, had been selected round-up boss by Clate Brocas. Under range custom, authority was absolute.. His word was law, the owners of the cattle being as much under his orders as any common puncher or horse-wrangler.

When the riders and representatives of the various spreads were assembled at the holding spot, Brock picked his lieutenants and began issuing instructions and parceling out the work. When he had finished his assignments, Jim Hatfield, as foreman of the Bar A, approached him. In his voice was the respect due the roundup boss, but also a quiet firmness.

"Looks like to me, Brock, yuh're handin' all the over-tough chores to my men," he said. "I'm tellin' you plain I don't think it's fair?"

Instantly the big roundup boss bristled, and squared off, He glared at the speaker.

"Listen," he growled in harsh and threatening tones, "I'm givin' the orders. I know my business, and I don't need any bush-hoppin', muley to tell it to me. You tighten up yore lip."

Before he could finish the sentence, Hatfield slapped him across the mouth with the flat of his hand and knocked him sprawling. Roaring curses, Brock scrambled to his feet and rushed, huge fists flailing.

Hatfield deftly stepped aside, avoided the other's hurtling rush with lithe ease, and again knocked Brock off his feet with the flat of his hand.

Brock was game. Once more he got to his feet, a trifle unsteadily, and once more he measured his length on the ground.

This time he stayed there. Raising himself on one elbow, and rubbing his reddened jaw, he stared quizzically at the Ranger. His bloody lips widened in a grin. He leaped lightly to his feet once more, and extended a huge paw.

"If yuh don't mind, feller," he said, a twinkle in his little red-rimmed eyes, "I'd like to have the feel of that hand without seein' a flock of stars at the same time."

They shook hands warmly. "Now about those assignments," Brock began, "suppose we do it a better way. Don't yuh figger—"

Young Cal Whittaker shook his head, and stared enviously at the tall Ranger.

"That's the kind of feller yuh allus dream of bein' like—and never get to," he remarked. His companions nodded gravely as Brock and Hatfield walked off together, discussing amicably the work of the morrow.

The roundup got under way. Troops of cowboys from each ranch rode over their own ranges, spread out, divided into small parties which eventually broke up until the riders were separated by distances that varied according to the nature of the range to be worked over. Each man hunted out all the cattle on the ground over which he rode. Where the ground was much broken, careful hunting for lone steers and small groups was necessary. The cattle were gathered up by ones and twos and small groups by the questing riders and driven to the holding spot. Here they were held in close herd until enough were assembled to warrant a cutting out.

The cowboys changed to trained cuttin' horses and rode into the herd, and began the dangerous and difficult work of separat-

ing out the various brands, driving them past the tally man and running them to the individual holding spots of the various spreads, where representatives were waiting.

AS THE individual herds grew, they were cut for shipment. The beef cuts were held in close herd. The cutbacks and culls not wanted for shipping were separated from the beef herd.

Cattle not belonging to the Cross C were also cut out of the roundup herd and run into the day herds of the various spreads, from which they would eventually be driven back onto their various ranges.

Late calves and those overlooked during the Spring roundup were singled out and branded and assigned to the herds in which they belonged. Coulees, canyons, foothills, washes and flats were carefully combed for strays.

"If there are any mavericks roamin' around in them brakes after this cow hunt is over, it means bad combin' on somebody's part," the roundup boss warned.

To Hatfield and Jack Audley, who had joined the roundup, was assigned the difficult task of combing the Bar A's west range. Hatfield had requested this chore from Brock, and Audley had elected to join him. This was the meanest bit of range in the section, broken as it was by the granite claws of the hills which were scored by deep canyons and washes, many of which contained water and good grass but were a tangle of chaparral thickets studded by buttes and chimney rocks. Here fat beefs had holed up all summer and had grown wary and had become so thoroughly familiar with the rough and broken terrain that snaking them out was like chasing a rabbit through a cactus patch barefooted.

"Yuh never can tell about these holes-in-the-wall," Audley remarked as they entered a narrow, gloomy canyon thickly brush-grown. "Sometimes yuh'll find plenty of beefs in them, then again there won't be a one in what looks promisin' territory. The chief catch is water. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it ain't, and there's both kinds of springs and criks in the same canyon, often as not. Just around the next bend here, for instance, there's a fine big spring that yuh can't get a bronc to stick his nose in, though the water looks to be fine."

A little later they paused beside the spring in question. It was a large well of limpidly clear water which oozed up imperceptibly from a bottom of veined and broken rock.

"Looks fine," Hatfield observed.

"Taste it," Audley suggested.

Hatfield dismounted, squatted beside the water and scooped up a handful. He touched it to his lips, made a wry face.

"Bitter as all get out," he announced. "Almost as bad as that little creek what runs alongside the trail coming into town from the southwest."

Audley chuckled. "That creek yuh're speakin' of wasn't there a year back," he remarked. "That creek is made by the water pumped out of the Imperial mine. It's the worst of the lot—don't believe a feller could swaller it. Burns yore mouth and puckers it all up. This is the same sort, but not quite so strong."

Hatfield squatted on his heels and studied the clear water. "I tasted water like that somewhere before," he mused. "Can't seem to recollect just where."

The concentration furrow between his brows deepened with thought. He stared at the rocky bottom of the spring. The rocks were chiefly a dark, reddish brown in color, splotched with lighter hues which reminded Hatfield of fresh horse flesh. At the edge of the water, he noted they were touched in places with a faintly irridescent bloom in which merged purple and shades of blue. Here and there were specks of a greenish tinge.

Suddenly his eyes began to glow. "I remember now, where I tasted that darn water once," he muttered under his breath. "It was there, also, where I saw rocks like these, too. Chalcocite? No, it's Bornite, sure as shootin'! I'm beginnin' to savvy some things all of a sudden. Bisbee, Arizona, that's where I tasted water like this, and saw rocks like this, too. This is going to stand some investigation. If what I'm beginnin' to think is true, no wonder so much trouble, for no apparent good reason, is bein' kicked up in these parts. And I'm commencin' to get an idea who's back of all the secret meanness, too."

He profferred no audible comment, however, but mounted and rode up the canyon with Audley, joining in the latter's conversation anent range matters. Yet all the while the concentration furrow was deep between his brows.

THEY combed out numbers of cows and calves, in the course of the day, and drove them from the canyon.

"I reckon that cleans it," Audley remarked, as they shoved their charges toward the holding spot. Hatfield nodded agreement but just the same, he rode into the dark gorge again the following day, and he rode alone. This time his riding equipment differed slightly. A capacious saddle bag tapped against the ribs of the rangy bay he was forking for the day, something a working cowboy rarely if ever includes in his rig. Also, which was unusual, his heavy Winchester snugged in the saddle boot under his left leg.

Riding slowly, Hatfield made his way up the gorge. Thickets which might well hold a stray cow or two he passed by without

even a cursory examination. But every spring or trickle of water he encountered interested him intensely. He was far up the canyon, and the sun was low in the west, when at last he discovered what he sought.

Flowing from a low opening in the face of a towering reddish cliff was a clear, shallow stream of the bitter, acrid water. Hatfield dismounted, studied the opening, and decided it was large enough to crawl into. From his saddlebags he took a small chipping hammer and several fat candles. Lighting one of the candles and stowing the hammer in a pocket, he stepped into the shallow water and crawled through the opening in the cliff face. It was of sufficient width, and high enough, so that he could make fairly good progress in a half stooping, half crawling posture.

The light quickly faded as he wormed into the narrow burrow in the rock. Soon only the flickering flame of the candle provided illumination. The silence was deadly, augmented rather than diminished by the soft wash and ripple of the stream. The reddish wall of the cavern seemed to press in on him until he experienced a choking sensation. The air, however, though thick and muddy, was not unbreathable and the candle burned with a clear flame.

For more than half a mile he slithered and scrambled through the shallow water, until his back ached unbearably with the strained posture, and his feet and hands were sore from constant contact with the water-worn pebbles that formed the bed of the stream.

Finally the cleft narrowed and lowered until further progress was impossible. Squatting on his haunches, he wedged the candle in a crevice, took out the hammer and began chipping the rock sides of the burrow.

Flake after flake of the stone he examined by the candle light, casting some aside, stowing others away in his pockets. The outer surfaces were uniformly splotched with purple and blue, while the points of cleavage showed a dark reddish brown with a metallic appearance and lustre.

After a while he desisted from his labors, lighted a fresh candle and with considerable difficulty, managed to turn around and retrace his steps through the watery corridor.

The sun was already behind the western crags when he reached the outer air, and the gorge was gloomy with shadows. He mounted and rode until he found a spring with sweet water, beside which he made a camp for the night, turning his horse loose to fill himself on the succulent grass that grew amid the scattered thickets. From his saddlebags he took bacon, bread, coffee and a small frypan.

But before preparing his supper over the fire he had kindled, he raked out a bed of glowing coals and tossed several of the rock fragments onto it. He fed the coals from time to time with twigs, keeping up a uniform temperature, while he intently scrutinized the fragments blistering in the heat. His eyes glowed as he noted tiny reddish globules forming on the surface of the stone.

"I was right," he muttered at length. "It is bornite ore. Rich, too."

He stared up at the reddish cliffs that had for so many years hidden well their secret.

"No wonder things are pickin' up in this section," he mused. "Well, they're due to hum still more, before long."

TIME passed as he stared into the fire, his eyes brooding.

"Just a few loose ends to tie up, now," he said at length. "But somewhere or other I got a feeling it isn't goin' to be as easy as it appeared at first. That hellion has got brains, and I'm willin' to bet a peso he still has a card or two, mebbe an ace, up his sleeve. Yes, sirree, he's a smooth article; and so far I really haven't got a thing on him. I could spoil his game right now, but that way I couldn't drop a loop on him, and he'd just go to work at some more hellishness some place else. He's responsible for one murder I know of, right now, and who knows how many others. A couple of times I came mighty nigh to being on the list myself. It will be interesting to find out who he really is and where he dropped from. Not from where he claims, that's sure for certain. That's the secret by which I may be able to put a hot iron on him."

With a shrug of his broad shoulders, Jim Hatfield set about preparing a helpin' of chuck. After which he rolled up in his blanket beside the fire and slept soundly through the night.

After a leisurely breakfast of his left-over provisions, the following morning, he saddled up and rode slowly down the brush choked gorge. As he did so, he studied the cliffs on either side, nodding his head with satisfaction from time to time. He was not far from the mouth of the valley and the cliffs were lowering appreciably when, atop the brush grown ridge to the south, he thought he detected sudden movement. At the same instant the morning sunlight flashed a quick gleam, as if from reflecting metal, from the cliff top.

Instantly Jim Hatfield acted. He flung himself sideways from the saddle, on the side away from the cliff. With the same flashing movement, he drew his heavy Winchester from where it rested in the saddle boot.

Hardly had he hit the ground when something whined through the space his body had occupied the moment before. A moment later, the whiplash crack of a rifle came to his ears. As he crouched low, his horse gave an almost human scream, reared high, crashed over on its side, stiffened once, and was still. Again sounded the crackling report.

"Plugged right through the heart, pore devil!" the Ranger muttered, staying low in the shelter of the animal's body. Throwing up the Winchester he lined sights with the spot where he had seen the reflected gleam from the drygulcher's shifting rifle barrel, and sent shot after shot raking the brush.

Peering through the smoke, he thought he saw a waving of the bushes near the spot. He fired at it, waited an instant, then fired again.

All signs of movement had ceased. No more reports broke the stillness.

"Wonder if I got him?" the Lone Wolf muttered. "Mebbe. But perhaps he's just holed up snug waitin' for me to show my head."

For long moments he lay quietly behind the sheltering carcass of the horse.

"I'm sure glad I wasn't forking Goldy today," he congratulated himself. The big sorrel was indeed taking it easy in the Bar A corrals, Hatfield not caring to risk his legs in daily range work.

On the cliff top, nothing moved. The silence remained unbroken. Finally, Hatfield decided to take a chance. Stooping low, he dashed for the cover of an outcropping of rock. No bullet screeched through the air. He dropped behind the stone, and again concentrated his gaze on the cliff top, brilliantly outlined in the morning sunlight.

Suddenly it seemed to Hatfield that the sunlight was not so bright as before. A misty haze seemed to be dimming the brilliant rays. Instinctively he glanced to the east, toward the not very distant canyon mouth, and uttered a sharp exclamation.

Clouds of smoke were rolling up from the canyon floor. His nostrils suddenly tingled to the pungent whiff of wood smoke. To his ears came a faint crackling.

Hatfield half rose to his feet, staring down canyon. Then he cursed softly.

"The smooth devil!" he muttered. "Set fire to the brush down there in the mouth of the canyon. Now this is gettin' interestin'!"

HE GAZED at the smoke cloud, which was rolling swiftly up-canyon. He realized that his position was a precarious one. The gorge was grown from wall to wall with the tinder-dry chaparral, through which the flames were racing with the speed of a running horse. He glanced at the perpendicular cliffs which walled the canyon. A goat couldn't climb them. The canyon he knew, from his ride up it with Audley, was a box, the end wall as steep as the sides.

"Can't stop here," he muttered. Leaving the shelter of the outcropping, stooping low, he ran swiftly up the canyon, dodging in and out between the thickets and the outcroppings of stone. Glancing back over his shoulder he saw that the soaring smoke column was appreciably nearer. The whole

[*Turn page*]

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lower section of the canyon was a seething inferno.

"Gainin' on me," he panted. "If something doesn't break soon, it looks like this is curtains. That feller is smart, and instead of an ace up his sleeve, it looks like he had the joker!"

The air was thick with smoke and burning embers borne on the draft that sucked up the gorge. The heat was already intense. Hatfield coughed and choked. His body was bathed in sweat. It ran into his eyes and blinded him. He stumbled, nearly fell, recovered himself with an effort and continued at a shambling run. The heat, the smoke and the terrific exertion were sapping his strength with alarming rapidity. Close behind him the flames were roaring and crackling, increasing their speed as the draft aroused by the fire gained strength. Grimly he set his lips and staggered on, with only the hopelessly blank end wall of the canyon as his goal.

He stumbled again, almost fell as he slithered down the sloping bank of a tiny stream. Water! What wouldn't he give for one long cool drink! But he dared not pause for an instant. The fire was at his very heels. Chances are it was too bitter to drink, anyhow. This must be the overflow from under the cave in the cliff.

The cave! The remembrance of the deep hole acted as a tonic to his clouded brain. The long and narrow cave in the cliff! Obeying a blind instinct rather than reason, he whirled and raced with his last remaining strength toward the south wall of the gorge, paralleling the wall of flame that roared toward him. He could feel its fiery breath. The smoke strangled his lungs, blurred his eyes. The withering heat was drying up his blood.

Before him loomed the side wall, cleft by the dark opening of the cave. He crashed through a straggle of thorny brush, and with the tongues of flame reaching for him, dived into the narrow crevice.

Back and back into the cool blackness he crawled, breathing great gasps of the close but still untainted air. Outside he could hear the ominous roar of the flames. Twisting about he saw the cave mouth, a glaring red eye filmed by the swirling smoke clouds. Then a bend in the tunnel hid it from view. He crawled another hundred yards or so and sank prostrate in the shallow water. Smoke filtered into the cave, but not enough to make the air unbreatheable. The cool water felt heavenly to his numbed body, although he dared not try to quench his burning thirst with the bitter fluid. Slouching against the damp wall of the cavern, he sank into a stupor of exhaustion.

Hatfield woke up chilled to the bone and so stiff he could hardly move. With painful slowness he crawled to the mouth of the cave and peered out. The gorge was still thick with smoke and smoldering ashes, but the fire had evidently burned itself out for want of fuel. He emerged from the cave, coughing in the smoky atmosphere, and warmed his chilled bones and dried his clothes at a still fitfully blazing log. Suddenly he laughed harshly. He had just remembered the explosive sheets in their waterproof case in his pocket.

"If the fire had got me, I sure would've gone out in a blaze of glory," he chuckled. "Reckon there wouldn't have been enough left for a buryin'!"

CHAPTER X

The Fourth Attempt

SOON AFTER he had warmed himself and gotten rid of some of his stiffness, he picked his way carefully down the scorched gorge. He was just emerging from the smoky mouth when he saw two horsemen riding swiftly toward him across the prairie. He promptly took cover until he identified them as Wes Hartsook and Cal Whittaker. They recognized him a moment later and spurred forward with whoops of greeting.

"We saw the smoke and decided we'd better ride over and see what it was all about," explained Hartsook. "Were you in there, Boss?"

"That's right," Hatfield replied, without further explanation. "I got out, but my horse is dead. He went down under me."

Whittaker clucked sympathetically. "Hope yuh had time to shoot him before the fire got him," he remarked.

"Yep, he was dead before the flames made me run for my life," Hatfield replied."

"That's good. But you sure had a narrow squeak. Hop up behind me and we'll head for the ranchhouse. Reckon yuh feel like some pancakes and steamin' coffee about now. Yuh look plumb played out."

Hatfield rode to Mota the following morning. Upon reaching town, he headed for the post office, where he mailed a small package and a letter requesting certain information. Then he rode back up the valley to the scene of the roundup, which was drawing to a close.

Three days later the Bar A shoved a small beef herd to Mota and the mine yards. Hatfield and Audley joined Harrison Wainwright in the office.

"They found that break in the telegraph line, after hunting and testing for two days," Wainwright announced. "Some of our enemies had cut the wire close to a pole and then fastened it together again with a leather plug that couldn't be noticed from the

ground. It's repaired now, and they've got men guarding the pumping station and the water tank. It was just as you said, Hatfield. Stuff had been poured into the tank. It caused the water to foam in the boilers. Things were all right once the tank was washed out and refilled with fresh water from the spring. The track is shovin' along fast. There'll be rails beneath my tipple in another two or three days. Then we'll get down to business. Not a bit too soon, either. My time limit is getting mighty short."

For quite a while they sat talking. The day shift was due off work and the majority of the miners were already out of the pit. The newly organized night shift would not be ready to start work for half an hour, although the relief miners already were congregating in the yard outside the office.

Hatfield and Audley were just rising to their feet to depart when suddenly the walls of the building rocked and reeled. Chairs and tables danced. Bits of plaster fell to the floor and the air quivered to a tremendous rumbling explosion. Wainwright was knocked clean off his feet by the concussion, while Audley was slammed against the wall and Hatfield sent staggering almost off balance.

"Good gosh all hemlock!" gasped Audley as he clawed himself erect. "What was that?"

Wainwright scrambled to his feet, instantly surmising what had happened.

"Dust explosion!" he panted. "We have no gas to speak of. It couldn't have been anything but dust. My stars! Are the men all out?"

Hatfield bounded to the door, flung it open and peered across the yard. Black smoke was pouring from the pit mouth. Men were running and shouting. The pumping engine was chattering madly. The safety valve of the winding engine was sending a white plume into the air.

Hatfield leaped from the porch, Audley and Wainwright at his heels.

"Shut off that engine!" he roared to the panicky pumper. "Yore line's busted and the engine's racin' itself to pieces."

He headed for the shaft mouth as the pumper madly twirled his throttle shut. At the door of the winding engine house the Ranger paused.

"How are the cages?" he asked the white-faced engineer. "Do they work?"

The man pulled a lever. A drum began to turn with a chattering of the pawls. It creaked to a stop, jerked, resumed its winding chatter.

"Cage's workin'," announced the engineer. "She's windin' up all right. Must've caught on somethin' for a minute, but she pulled free. There, she's up topside," as the release clicked and the drum ceased to turn.

WAINWRIGHT was calling excitedly to a foreman. "All out, John? The night shift hadn't started in?"

The foreman was hastily checking, a time sheet. Suddenly his face went white.

"Ten men way up at the end of Number Seven drift!" he exclaimed. "Masons were walling up that gallery where the water's been comin' through so fast. They were workin' overtime to get it done tonight. Good grief! they're trapped if the roof gave way down there. It's the weakest drift in the mine."

"Where do you think the full force of that explosion was, John?" Wainwright asked.

"Lowest level, Number Seven drift," the foreman replied. "I'm scairt, sir! It's our dustiest gallery, and it sounded deep to me. I was standing close to the shaft when she let go. No fire came up, only smoke. Yes, it must've been deep."

Wainwright turned quietly to the men flocking about the still smoking pit mouth. "Volunteers," he said in steady tones. "I want ten men. No married men. Don't forget—another explosion may come while we're down there! That one may have started a fire—for the smoke keeps coming out without a break. If there is a fire, another blast is likely."

Men began to step forward. Wainwright accepted some, turned back others. He led the way to the cage.

"Picks and shovels and sledges and crowbars," he directed. "Plenty of powder down below, if we need it."

Hatfield turned to Audley. "You better stand guard, Jack, and help keep order," he told the rancher. "Women and kids will be flockin' here in a hurry. Help the foreman keep them quiet."

"And you?"

"I'm goin' down," the Ranger replied quietly. "I've had some experience with mines and am familiar with their workin's. I may be able to help."

Audley said nothing, but he gripped his foreman's hand hard as he stepped into the cage.

Slowly and cautiously the winding engineer let the cage drop back into the mine shaft. Wainwright stood with his hand on the signal cord. The others stood wedged tightly together in the constricted space, their faces grim in the flare of their cap lamps. Hatfield and Wainwright had both hastily donned caps. The Ranger, towering above his squat companions, gazed at the stern faces in the flicker of the lights.

"Real folks!" he told himself softly. "Just like Texans—the making of good Texans. No fuss, no nonsense. Doin' the work that comes to hand, and takin' their chances. Mebbe they don't speak our language overwell, but they ride the same trail, and wear the same brand."

Slowly the cage descended through the smoky darkness. Wainwright checked off the levels.

"Here we are, Number Seven drift," he exclaimed as the cage jerked to a halt. He slid open the door and they stepped out onto the floor of the drift.

"Blow was here, all right," muttered Wainwright. The light of the lamps revealed huge blocks of coal and splintered timbers littering the floor. Wainwright held his lamp high.

"Roof looks all right, down this way, anyhow," he announced. "Let's go, boys."

They hurried up the drift, picking their way amid the debris, coughing in the smoky air. Wainwright anxiously scanned the ditches on either side.

"She's blocked somewhere up ahead," he said. "Hardly a trickle in the ditches, and there had ought to be plenty."

Several hundred yards farther and Hatfield, who was walking in front, abruptly came to a halt.

"Here it is," he announced quietly. "The roof's down, the drift blocked."

"And those poor devils of masons are back of it," added Wainwright. He made a rapid calculation.

"Only a couple of hundred feet from here to the head of the drift, where the water comes through," he announced. "It must be backing up fast. We'll have to work fast if we're to get them out, even if the fall didn't do for them. Hop to it, boys."

"Shall we use powder, Boss?" asked a foreman.

Wainwright shook his head. "Too close to them—can't take a chance except as a last resort. There's a lot of gas down here, too. Look at the lamps, how red the flames are. We don't want to risk setting that off. No, it's picks and bars and shovels. Let's go—five men to a gang, and make 'er fly."

THE miners set to work, tearing out the fallen blocks, hauling on the splintered timbers, loosening the larger pieces with bars and sledges. Jim Hatfield, towering among the miners, took his turn with the rest, his mighty strength doing the work of three. He disdained the breathing spell vouchsafed while the gangs were changed and kept steadily at it, apparently impervious to fatigue. Brawny miners, accustomed to the back-breaking toil, stared at him and shook their heads in wordless admiration. Others chattered what was meant for compliments in a tongue he couldn't understand. Easy to comprehend, however, were their smiles and glances. He grinned back at them, his even teeth flashing white in his blackened face, and plied his ponderous sledge the faster.

Behind them, the cage creaked to the floor of the drift once more. Ten additional volunteers hurried forward to spell the original ten.

"We're doing it, boys," encouraged little Wainwright, who seemed to be everywhere at once. "Look how fast the water's coming through, now. She's getting thin."

Ten minutes later, Jim Hatfield in the forefront of the workers, was swept back by a deluge of icy water.

"We're through, boys!" he shouted. "And I can see lights in there. Some of 'em are alive, anyhow. Look out, here comes more water!"

The miners gave back under the increasing flood, and at that instant, Hatfield felt a suck of air down the drift.

"Down on yore faces!" he roared. "Down!" setting the example by throwing himself to the ground and covering the back of his head with his arms.

The experienced miners understood instantly. They dropped where they were, even as a thunderous roar shook the gallery. A flash of flame filled the air, setting clothes on fire, shriveling hair. The gallery rocked and reeled. There was an instant of tingling silence. Then a booming rumble echoed the roar.

Hatfield staggered to his feet, beating out the fire that smouldered his clothes. He was blinded, deafened, his senses whirling. Every lamp had been extinguished by the blast and the darkness was absolute. He fumbled a match, struck it, and got his lamp going. Other lights winked on, revealing the miners, bruised and bleeding and scorched, but none seriously hurt. It would have been different had not the Ranger instantly translated that tell-tale suck of air that always precedes a coal mine explosion.

"Quick thinking, feller," mumbled Wainwright through his cut lips. "If we'd been standing up when she let go, somebody would've been killed. That was a bad one."

The rescued masons were streaming through the opening in the fall. One man had a broken arm. Several others were badly cut and bruised about the head and face, but nobody had been killed by the first blast.

Hatfield was heading back down the drift. He recalled that ominous booming rumble that followed the explosion. Fifty yards down the drift he found what he feared had indeed happened. A wall of coal and earth blocked the gallery. The second explosion had brought down another section of the roof. As he paused in front of it, he sloshed into water to his ankles.

"Get the tools, boys," he called to his companions. "We're not through yet. Now we got to get busy savin' ourselves."

Grimly the miners went to work once more. But this time the task was more difficult, for about them steadily rose the icy bitter water that flowed in from the head of the gallery. The air, too, was close and

heavy, tainted with gas and the acrid fumes of the explosion.

Something about those biting fumes caused Jim Hatfield to sniff sharply. His lips set in a hard line, his eyes turned coldly gray.

"That's not gas or dust-explosion fumes," he muttered under his breath. "If that isn't dynamite fumes, I never smelled any! Yore trick again, feller, and the last one yuh'll play, if yuh don't win on this hand."

But to the Ranger, it began to look as if the rascal who had already made three unsuccessful attempts to do away with him was more than likely to succeed in this latest attempt. The miners worked with the energy of desperation but the icy flood, pouring into the gallery, rose with even greater speed. Already the water was nearly waist high at the face of the fall, which necessarily slowed up the work.

WAINWRIGHT was muttering savagely as the perspiration poured down his drawn face.

"We'll never make it, at this rate," Hatfield heard him say. "It'll drive us back in a few minutes, and then we'll just have to sit and wait to be drowned like rats in a plugged drain. If we'd only brought powder along with us, there'd be some hope. But now we haven't got a chance!"

Hatfield stepped back beside the little owner.

"Think they'll be working on the other side of this cave in?" he asked.

"Hard to tell, but not likely, for a while," Wainwright replied. "They must have heard that second blast, and will hardly try to come down until the fumes clear out, even if the cage is still working, which is doubtful. The bucket was at the bottom of the shaft this time, you know, and must have caught the full force of the blast. The gears and pulleys are mighty liable to be jammed, or the cable knocked off. No, I'm afraid it's all up to us. If we'd only brought powder along. Then, we could have blasted a way through this mess in a hurry. It's not far to the other side, now. See how the water swirls and eddies. That means it's spurting through the fall. No, it's not thick, but it's too much for us to break through in time with bars and sledges. If we only had some powder!"

Suddenly Hatfield started, his hand flew to the broad inner pocket of his shirt.

"Feller, I believe I've got it," he exclaimed. "Start the boys drilling a powder hole in the fall, and you come back here and help me make a fuse. I believe what a treacherous sneak once tried to kill me with, is goin' to save all our lives."

Wainwright stared at the Ranger as if firmly convinced he had suddenly lost his mind, but under the stern insistence of the Lone Wolf's blazing eyes, he quickly gave the necessary orders.

Hatfield quickly busied himself in wrenching loose some bullets from several forty-five cartridges. Next he tore a long strip from his shirt, dampened it slightly and twisted it into a cord. He sprinkled the damp cord liberally with the powder from the shells.

"Sort of a makeshift, but it'll do all right in a pinch," he muttered to the wide-eyed Wainwright. "Got that hole ready, fellers?"

"All set," replied the wondering foreman.

"You fellers get back up the drift," Hatfield told the men. "You go along too, Wainwright."

"Go along, nothing!" growled the little owner as the miners obediently trudged up the gallery. "I'm staying here to see just how you plan to blow a hole in that mess with your shirt tail. That'll be a brand new one on me."

Despite the deadly seriousness of the situation, Hatfield had to chuckle. He unbuttoned the pocket, took out the waterproofed pouch and carefully removed the folded sheets of glazed paper.

"What in the dickens have you got there?" Wainwright wondered. But Hatfield only grinned as he proceeded to twist the sheets into a roll that would fit into the powder hole, and fastened the "fuse" to them.

"Get ready to hightail, feller," he told Wainwright. "This darn fuse is liable to burn mighty fast, and when it hits that roll of paper, unless I'm fooled a lot, all blazes is goin' to bust loose hereabouts."

As he spoke, he stuffed the rolled paper deep into the powder hole, tamped it home with a hammer handle, stuffed the hole with earth and rock and struck a match to the end of the fuse. As he anticipated, it burned with alarming rapidity, sizzling and sputtering, the flame racing along the grains of dampened powder.

"Sift sand!" he shouted. Seizing Wainwright by the arm, he ran him, leaping and stumbling, through the water that was almost to his shoulders, up the gallery. They were a scant hundred yards from the fall when again the drift rocked and reeled to a deafening roar. Both Hatfield and Wainwright were hurled headlong by the force of the explosion.

The first thing Hatfield heard when his ears stopped ringing was the rush and gurgle of swiftly moving water.

"We did it!" he whooped. "The water's draining off. Let's get out of here quick! Those fumes are deadly."

Choking and gasping, tears streaming from their eyes, they pushed their way through the jagged opening the explosion had blown in the barrier and reeled down the drift to the shaft mouth, where the air was somewhat clearer.

As Wainwright had surmised, the cage at the bottom of the shaft was crippled. It took some time to repair it, but finally it rose,

creaking and groaning, to the surface, bearing as its first load the injured masons. Soon all the miners were topside. Hatfield and Wainwright were last to leave the drift.

"After a while," remarked Wainwright, "I'm going to wake up and find out I've been dreaming all this. It just couldn't happen. Blowing your way out of a mine with your shirt-tail and several sheets of paper!"

CHAPTER XI

"Unto the Least of These"

WHEN his burns and bruises had been patched up by Doc Cooper, Hatfield elected to spend the night in town.

"The last hundred yards of steel will be laid by the railroad tomorrow," he told Audley. "I want to be here for the finish."

"All right," Audley agreed. "I'll stay with yuh."

The completion of the railroad spur was quite an event. The steel had been placed beside the right-of-way the day before. The crossties had been dropped onto the prepared grade. When morning came, gangs of brawny track layers swarmed over the scene. They spaced the ties, gripped the ponderous thirty-foot rails with lifting clamps and dropped them in place. A foreman with his gauge lined the twin ribbons of steel. Spike men with their hefty mauls proceeded to spike the rails into place as soon as the wrench men had placed the fish plates and bolted them in place with mighty twists of their long-handled wrenches.

The air resounded with the musical clang of the hammers on spike heads. Mauls described circles of flashing light as sinewy arms swung them with a will.

Behind the spike men came the gandy-dancers, jiggling their shovels with a rhythmic foot in the peculiar dance that gave them their names. The ties were tamped tightly with earth and gravel. Crushed stone was shoveled between them and likewise tamped and rammed solid. The next rail was swung into line and the hammer men quickened the tempo of their musical beat as the end of the job drew near. They sang lustily as they swung the mauls, keeping time with the blows. The gandy-dancers joined in with a weird chant timed to the dance of their shovels. The rail carriers bawled a whooping chorus.

From the crowd that had gathered to watch the completion of the job arose a spontaneous cheer. Streaming faces were wiped by muscular forearms, hats were thrown off, shirts opened at the neck. Faster and faster swung the hammers, faster and faster jiggled the shovels. The lines of steel seemed to fairly flow forward. They passed under the tipple, the hammers blurring in its shadow, crept out into the sunlight again and paralleled the hillside with its long row of loaded bins.

Behind the track layers, keeping place with them, a long line of empty coal cars rolled at their very heels. The engineer of the locomotive pushing the string leaned far out the cab window, one hand on the throttle, the other hovering over his air brake valve. With the utmost nicety he timed the revolving drivers of his engine to the increasing speed of the steel men. Heading the string of hoppers and gondolas was a bobbing red caboose. The trainmen leaned over the railing of the rear platform and cracked jokes with the trackmen who toiled in its shadow. A lordly "shack" — brakeman — sat ensconced in majesty in the cupola, nonchalant cigarette drooping from his lip, one hand out the window to signal the engineer. His wrist twisted pliantly as he wiggled a come ahead, stiffened as his horizontal hand cautioned "slow!"

Faster and faster swung the hammers. Their musical clangor and clang blended in a drumroll of staccato sound. The shovels flashed. The foreman with his gauge measured and squinted, uttering harsh words of direction and advice.

"Drill, ye terriers, drill!" he bawled. "Swing them hammers, shake them shovels! Space them ties there, you! Ste-e-e-l to the wood! Two more lengths, b'ys, and ye drink! Swing them hammers!"

The last lengths of rail were swung into place. The wrench men strained and twisted, clamping the fish plates tightly under the flanges. The foreman slid his gauge along the parallel lines. It slipped smoothly to the end of the rails.

"Nail it!" he bellowed.

Behind him the hammers fairly flew. A last resonant clang, an exultant whoop. The spike men leaped aside. The gandy-dancers hopped a last mad dance. Shovels were flung into the air. Hats joined them. The brakeman in the cupola held his arm rigid, waved it madly up and down in the vertical stop signal. The engineer slammed his throttle shut, twisted the handle of his brake valve. Air hissed from the reservoirs. The plungers of the brake cylinders shot out. The shoes clamped againt the tires with a resonant clang. Brake rigging groaned and rattled. Couplers banged. The train lurched to a halt.

INSTANTLY the sliding doors of the bins on the slope above were jerked up. Coal rumbled down the chutes and fell with a deafening rattle into the cars below. From the crowd rose a thunderous cheer. Shovel men swarmed over the cars, levelling off the loads. The engineer of the locomotive

turned to the front, settled himself in his seat. He glanced back over his shoulder, waiting. Ten minutes later the conductor stepped over to one side, waved a highball. The engineer opened his throttle. The great drivers turned slowly, from the stack came a hollow boom.

The drivers slipped, spun madly to the accompaniment of a chattering thunder from the stack. Steam-streaked black smoke shot high into the air. The engineer twisted his sand blowers, sent streams of sand gushing under the spinning drivers. They caught, held, strained, turned slowly. The stack boomed again, and again. The couplers creaked and strained, the car wheels began clicking over the joints. The boom of the stack settled to a humming roar as the engineer pulled his reverse lever higher and higher up the quadrant. The whistle shrieked a wild, exultant blast. The assembled crowd cheered louder than before. Lurching and swaying, its caboose markers bobbing and dwindling, the first coal train from Mota roared southward across the Haunted Desert.

Track layers, miners, and citizens streamed to the saloons to celebrate by getting drunk.

But there was little cause for celebration in the Imperial Coal Company's office. Harrison Wainwright was seated moodily at his desk when Hatfield and Audley entered.

"Nice news," he remarked. "My notes are over-due, you know, and I went over to the bank this morning to see about them. They told me there that since I had asked for an extension, they had sold the notes — to Clate Brocas!"

A moment of silence greeted this announcement.

"And they didn't notify you?" Audley cried. "Can they do that?"

"Sure, they can do it," Wainwright grunted. "A note of that kind is negotiable. It can be bought or sold or transferred at the discretion of the bank officials. They do not have to notify the drawer of the note, although it is customary to do so, common courtesy. But they didn't notify me."

"I reckon Clate Brocas has a good deal of say at the bank," admitted Audley. "Wouldn't be surprised if he is one of their biggest stockholders. Big depositor, anyhow. This is more of his smooth work, I'd say."

"Looks like it," agreed Wainwright. He frowned. "Mr. Brocas is likely to find himself in the coal business mighty shortly, from the looks of things."

"Yuh can't raise money to meet the notes?"

"Not enough, I'm afraid," Wainwright replied. "I'm telegraphing the boys to do what they can, but it doesn't look hopeful. Wood Kirchner, my manager, said he was going to try to get in touch with his former employers, back East, and see if they'll lend a hand. But you know how it is with big outfits of that kind. They're never strong on mixing up in matters of this kind, and they move mighty slow — investigations, and everything. I doubt if they could get under the tape in time to help, even if they wished."

Hatfield spoke for the first time. "Who did Kirchner work for, back East?" he asked.

"The Pittsburgh and Barboursville Coal Company," Wainwright replied. "That's a mighty big concern. Main offices in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They must have thought mighty well of him, judging from the recommendations he had from them, but, as I said once before, I have the idea he's one of these engineers with itchy feet and can't stay put in any one place over long. He intimated as much when he signed up with me. Warned me he might take a whim to shove along most any time. That kind, while they may respect his ability, doesn't stand over well with a steady concern, and his recommendation relative to an investment wouldn't carry much weight."

"Guess that's right," Audley agreed.

"Take it easy," Hatfield advised the glum owner. "Yuh can't always tell how far a bullfrog can jump by the color of his skin, and the roundup isn't over till the last calf's branded. Mebbe things will break for yuh yet."

AFTER leaving Audley and Wainwright Hatfield repaired to the newly opened railroad telegraph office. There he dispatched a long message which caused the operator, sworn to secrecy by the rules of the company and forbidden to comment, to stare at him with curiosity and respect.

"Rush that," Hatfield told him. "Yuh should get an answer before dark. Hold it for me until I call for it."

"I'll do that, sir," the operator promised respectfully. There was a look of awe in his eyes as they followed the tall form of the Lone Wolf out the door.

Later in the afternoon, Jim Hatfield met Clate Brocas in front of the Big Enough saloon. Brocas didn't know it, but Hatfield had ascertained that the Cross C owner would be in town during the course of the day, and had arranged to be on hand when Brocas showed up, knowing as he did that Brocas would head for the Big Enough saloon as soon as his business in town would permit.

Brocas hesitated, then squared his shoulders and approached the Ranger.

"I'm glad to run into yuh, Hatfield," he said, coming to a halt before the younger man. "You and me didn't hit it off so well the fust time we met, but since then yuh've shore put me mighty deep in yore debt. If the river had got my little gal that day, I reckon I wouldn't have had much left to live for. I sure appreciate what yuh did, and if there's any favor I can grant, don't hold back

a minute in askin' it."

Hatfield smiled down at the ranch owner, for Brocas, tall as he was, still had to raise his eyes a little to meet the Lone Wolf's level gaze.

"There is something yuh can do for me, Brocas," he said. "One yuh can do right this minute."

"Name it!" exclaimed Brocas, heartily and without hesitation.

"Yuh can take a little walk with me," Hatfield said, still smiling.

Brocas stared at him, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Anythin' you say, feller," he agreed.

Hatfield turned. Together they walked slowly toward the mining section of the town. Brocas's nose wrinkled as they entered the busy streets. He glanced about with evident distaste. The chatter of foreign tongues seemed to irk him. He grunted under his moustache.

Hatfield shortened his stride. With a jerk of his head he indicated the neat garden patches behind the little houses, which had been irrigated with water piped from the river.

"Things growin' nice, aren't they?" he remarked. Brocas grudgingly admitted that they were.

"Look at the nice clean curtains at the windows," the Ranger added. "Cheap stuff, but bright and fresh ironed and stiff with starch. And the flowers in the window boxes, and those bare floors—scrubbed white. Things like that make any kind of a little house a home, don't they?"

"I understand you've got about the nicest ranchhouse in all this section, Brocas," he went on before the ranch owner could reply. "Big cool rooms, inside patio, fine old furniture, flower gardens, big old trees to shade it, a graveled drive up from the trail. Fine tight barns for yore pet horses, and the like."

Brocas, looking sort of uncomfortable, reckoned it was so. Hatfield smiled, and they walked on a little farther.

Hatfield nodded at the groups of children playing in the open spaces.

"Look nice and healthy," he remarked again. Brocas grunted. He eyed the chattering youngsters with a disapproving eye. Hatfield's smile widened slightly.

"Nothin' like Texas air and Texas sun to make kids get as cute and frisky as calves fed on curly mesquite," he observed. "Reckon they didn't have this kind of sun and air back where they came from."

Brocas said nothing, but he stared strangely at the tall Ranger, who was apparently oblivious of his glance.

A moment later Hatfield paused beside a little girl making mud pies. She had curly flaxen hair, in which the sun caught ruddy glints. She looked up at the two big men from wide blue eyes, and smiled trustingly.

JIM HATFIELD spoke, his voice soft and musical. "Reckon it wasn't so many years back, Brocas, that yore own little girl was sort of like that, yes?"

Brocas tugged at his moustache, muttered something inaudible. Again he shot a glance at the Ranger.

"A mighty fine girl, that daughter of yores," Hatfield continued. "Straight and strong and mighty purty. Yes, the kind of a girl a father has a right to be proud of. Healthy in body, and healthy in mind. Of course, when she was little, like this tyke, she had plenty of clean fresh air, and sunshine, and good wholesome food. Different from what lots of kids back East, especially in coal minin' sections and the like, have to put up with. We've got plenty of good fresh air and sunshine goin' to waste out here in this big country of ours, Brocas."

Clate Brocas stared at the little girl, who was busy once more with her mud pies. Out of the corner of his eye, Hatfield saw him wet his lips with his tongue. Abruptly the rancher turned on his heel.

"Come on back up town," he growled harshly. "I need a drink."

They walked for some little time in silence. Then Brocas suddenly halted.

"Hatfield," he said, "I'm nigh onto fifty years old, and until I met you, no man ever knocked me off my feet. But you did it — twice!"

Drinkers in the Big Enough stared in astonishment as the two big men entered the saloon, arm in arm, chatting together in what was undoubtedly the most cordial relations. Hardwinter Burns, goggling and gulping, hastened to serve them.

And at a corner table, a couple of quiet, self-effacing men with hard mouths and alert eyes, gazed stonily at the friendly pair. A moment later they paid their score, slipped furtively from the saloon and hastened toward the mining section of the town.

Jim Hatfield, who missed nothing of what went on around him, saw them go, and his black brows drew together.

"Now where did those two hombres come from?" he mused, apropos of the departed pair. "Tinhorn gamblers, from their looks. Don't remember seeing them before. Seemed mighty interested in Clate and me. Wonder if they're aimin' to set into this game?"

CHAPTER XII

The Lone Wolf

BROCAS swung around in his saddle, about an hour later, tightening the reins as he prepared to depart. He looked at the Ranger, level eyed.

"I'll see yuh tomorrow, son," the rancher

said. "I've got to hustle back to the ranch, now, but tomorrow afternoon we'll talk things over proper. So long, son, if yuh wasn't already signed up, I'd shore like to have yuh in my outfit." He hesitated, then looked the Ranger squarely in the eye.

"Hatfield," he said, "I didn't have anythin' to do with blowin' up that blasted bridge."

The Lone Wolf smiled slightly. "Yuh don't have to tell me that, Brocas," he replied.

Clate Brocas said nothing more, but as he rode his horse down the street, away from the saloon, he looked like a man who has had a weight lifted from his shoulders.

Just as dusk was falling, Hatfield repaired to the telegraph office.

"Got your answer for yuh, sir," the operator said. He handed it to the Ranger. The message read:

"WOOD KIRCHNER DIED HERE NEARLY THREE YEARS AGO UNDER SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES. HE WAS FORMERLY OUR CHIEF CONSULTING ENGINEER. A SHORT TIME PRIOR TO HIS DEATH HE LEFT OUR EMPLOY. PLANNED TO SET UP IN BUSINESS FOR HIMSELF. DESCRIPTION YOU QUOTE FITS ONE BERNE MATTHEWS. MATTHEWS WAS KIRCHNER'S ASSISTANT. AN ABLE MAN AND AN OUTSTANDING CHEMIST. BUT ADDICTED TO GAMBLING. DISAPPEARED SHORTLY AFTER KIRCHNER'S DEATH. WAS FOUND TO BE HEAVILY IN DEBT. HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE OF HIS PRESENT WHEREABOUTS.

(SIGNED) W. J. STEVENS
GENERAL MANAGER
PITTSBURGH AND BARBOURSVILLE COAL CO.
PITTSBURGH, PA."

Hatfield read the message twice. Then he carefully stowed it in an inside pocket.

"Beginnin' to tie up," he told himself, a light in the depths of his green eyes. "Just a bit more and I'll be ready to drop my loop."

He found a letter awaiting him at the post office the following morning and read its contents with evident satisfaction. Then he stowed it away with the telegram he had received the night before.

"Yes, things are clearin' up fast," he repeated. "No wonder trouble has been bustin' loose in these parts. Plenty of reason for it. And is Jack Audley due for a surprise!"

Hatfield dropped in to see Harrison Wainwright a little later. The mine owner was in a pessimistic mood.

"Those dust explosions almost ruined the mine," he explained. "Roof down in every drift. Pumping machinery smashed to pieces and the water rising fast in all the galleries. Gas in Drift Seven. I don't dare operate again until a blower system is installed, not after what happened. We won't be able to turn a wheel for days, mebbe weeks. Looks like the jig is up. Brocas, I reckon, will be comin' around for payment on his notes about today, and I can't pay. He'll foreclose quick, I reckon."

"Mebbe," Hatfield replied, smiling slightly. "Better wait until he does, though."

"I'll wait," growled Wainwright. "That's all I can do."

Hatfield shot a glance at Wood Kirchner, the mine manager, busy as usual at his table of chemical paraphernalia. Kirchner was smiling to himself, and softly humming a little tune.

After stowing away some ham and eggs with Jack Audley, Hatfield entered the Big Enough saloon to wait for Clate Brocas. But as the afternoon wore on, the ranch owner failed to put up an appearance. The sun was slanting well down the western sky when a man rushed into the bar-room, his face working with excitement.

"They just found Clate Brocas, badly wounded," he shouted. "He didn't show up at the ranch last night, and the boys went lookin' for him shortly after sunup, this mornin'. They found him alongside the trail, shot through the head. Hurt mighty bad, I take it. Must've been lyin' there most of the night. They got him over to Doc Cooper's office."

HATFIELD and Audley, who had entered the saloon a few minutes before, hurried to the doctor's office. They found Cooper swabbing Brocas's wounded head. The ranch owner's face was ashen. He breathed in stertorous gasps.

"What about it, Doc?" Hatfield asked.

"Hard to say," the doctor grunted. "He's seriously hurt, and weak from the loss of blood. The slug is still inside his head somewhere. Must be layin' between the lobes of the brain, or up against the roof of the skull. No sign of brain hemorrhage, yet, anyhow."

"You going to operate?"

Doc Cooper shook his head. "Too much for me," he admitted. "I haven't the necessary facilities, and I'm no brain surgeon. The only chance is to run him down to the junction and put him in the railroad hospital there. They've got men who can perform this kind of delicate work. If the trip doesn't kill him, perhaps he has a chance to pull through. Got a constitution like a bay steer, or he'd be dead by now. He may have a chance, but it'll be touch and go."

"Think he'll regain consciousness before the operation?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'd say no," he replied. "Chances are he won't be able to speak for days. It's likely he'll be out of his head for quite a while. May never be right again. Can't tell about that, yet. But he'd do well if we can only get him operated upon quick enough. They're gettin' an engine

and a car ready right now. Somebody ought to rush word to his daughter at once, and notify Judge Dwyer. The judge has been Clate's lawyer for years — handles all his affairs. He'll know what to do about things. Will you attend to that, Audley?"

As they headed back to the Big Enough, after seeing the unconscious man placed aboard the hastily prepared train that would take him to the junction, Audley breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Thank heavens, I stayed in town last night," he said. "They can't lay this to me. Fifty men saw me in the Big Enough last night and this morning. I'm in the clear."

"But yore outfit is not in the clear," Hatfield told him quietly. "Keep yore eyes and ears open, Jack. There's liable to be bad trouble from this."

The next day, Hatfield, Audley and Harrison Wainwright paid a visit to Judge Dwyer's law office.

"I suppose you have come to see me about the notes of yours held by Clate Brocas, Mr. Wainwright?" the bulky old jurist remarked pontifically, regarding them from his cold eyes.

"Reckon that's right, Judge," Wainwright agreed. "Just what is to be done about them?"

"The last time I discussed the matter with Brocas, several days ago, he instructed me to foreclose," the lawyer replied. "He expressed himself vehemently regarding the matter and his instructions were exact and to the point. I hold, and have held for many years, Clate Brocas' power of attorney, and in accordance with that power, I feel that it is my duty to my client to follow out his expressed instructions to the letter, and foreclose as soon as the legal time allowed you has expired. Under the terms of the mortgage on your property, Mr. Wainwright, it will be sold at public auction to meet the face of the notes. I am sorry this had to happen, and I assure you I have no personal feelings in the matter. It is but my plain duty to carry out my client's orders as he gave them to me but a few days prior to his unfortunate accident."

"That sounds bad," said Wainwright, turning pale.

"Of course, you can yourself bid in the property if you are able, Mr. Wainwright," the attorney said, smiling slightly. "Although he did not directly intimate as much to me, I believe that Brocas contemplated bidding himself."

"You aren't going to bid in for him, then?"

"I have no such authority," the lawyer replied. "I was not instructed to do so, and in my client's absence, I could not act."

"Would his daughter have anything to say about the matter?" Wainwright asked.

JUDGE DWYER shook his head. "His daughter is a minor," he replied. "Legally she cannot interfere. The matter is solely in my hands."

"Well, I reckon that settles that," Wainwright remarked as they left the lawyer's office.

"Take it easy," Hatfield advised. "You got quite a few days yet before they can hold the sale, under the law. No tellin' what'll turn up by then."

Wainwright shook his head pessimistically. "Unless Kirchner is able to do something with his friends back East, I've a hunch this time I'm sunk," he replied. "There's sure nothing I can do. I'm flat as a wet leaf."

"Yuh never can tell which way a dill pickle is going to squirt," Hatfield consoled. "You just hang on like a sick kitten to a warm brick until all the cards are dealt. No knowin' what will show when yuh turn 'em over. Where yuh goin', Jack?"

"Marie is ridin' into town this afternoon and headin' for the junction on a special they're fixin' up for her," Audley replied. "I'm goin' to meet her and go along with her. So long, Jim, see yuh tomorrow, when I get back."

Hatfield accompanied Wainwright to the mine office, where they sat talking until it was late. Darkness had already fallen when a hurried step sounded outside. It proved to be a bartender from Hardwinter's Big Enough.

"I was hopin' I'd find yuh here, Hatfield," he said. "Hardwinter sent me. Said he didn't know who else to get. Trouble's liable to bust loose over at the saloon any minute. The Cross C and the Bar A outfits are both there, and there's plenty of deviltry in the makin'. The Cross C bunch has been there all afternoon, gatherin' up a talkin' load, and the Bar A just came surgin' in. The Cross C is sayin' the Bar A bushwhacked Clate Brocas, been sayin' it all afternoon, and they're gettin' plumb dangerous. The Bar A boys ain't backin' away from 'em an inch, and they're commencin' to arch their backs like mules in a hailstorm. If somethin' ain't done in a hurry, there'll be plenty of dead men to bury."

"Where's the sheriff?" Hatfield asked as he got to his feet.

"Down to the junction. Went down to see if he could talk with Clate Brocas, providin' he's come to after the operation."

Hatfield hitched his gun belts a trifle lower about his lean waist. At the same time he fumbled at a cunningly contrived secret pocket in his belt.

"Let's go," he told the barkeep, and strode from the office.

The instant Hatfield entered the Big Enough, he realized that the messenger had not exaggerated the seriousness of the situation. The Bar A riders were grouped at one end of the long bar, the Cross C hands at the other, with an open space between them.

Such patrons who had been caught in the saloon had taken refuge clear across the room and against the wall. Hatfield saw that the Bar A cowboys were outnumbered two to one. But they were facing their enemies with grim courage. Behind the bar was Hardwinter Burns, his face ashen, but also standing his ground.

All eyes were turned to Hatfield as he strode through the swinging doors, the thumbs of his slim hands hooked over his double cartridge belts. The Bar A riders looked considerably relieved at his arrival, the Cross C hands not particularly pleased.

Hatfield paused a moment, his steady gaze sweeping the two groups. Then he strode deliberately forward until he was between them.

"We've had enough of this foolishness," he said. "It's time for it to stop. I want all you gents to pull in yore horns and act sensible. There's been enough trouble without you fellers startin' more."

For a moment there was silence, which was followed by growls of resentment. Mark Brock, the Cross C foreman, stepped a pace in front of his men.

"Yuh're a good square man, Hatfield, and we know it," he said. "But you can't come bulgin' in here and give orders to us fellers. Our Boss has been cut down without bein' given a chance, and we know blamed well who was responsible. Yuh're new on this range. Take a friendly warnin' and don't horn in."

THERE was a growl of agreement from his men.

Abruptly Jim Hatfield raised his left hand above his head, so that all present could see what gleamed between his sinewy fingers. With one accord both groups stared at the object, their differences for the moment forgotten. It was a silver star set on a silver circle, the honored and feared and respected badge of the Texas Rangers!

A murmur ran through the groups. "A Ranger! He's a Texas Ranger!"

Hardwinter Burns let out a howl of delight. "I reckoned I'd seen him somewhere, all the time," he whooped. "Now I remember where. Yeah, he's a Ranger, and that ain't all. That's the Lone Wolf! You fellers ever hear tell of him?"

They had, every man in the room. They stared, awestruck, at the almost legendary man whose exploits were the talk of every cow or mining camp in the Southwest. The Lone Wolf!

Jim Hatfield's voice rang out, edged with steel.

"In the name of the State of Texas! Disperse, and go about your business in an orderly manner. Whittaker, Hartsook, you and the rest of yore outfit head for those corner tables and sit down. Brock, you and yore men hightail out of here, fork yore broncs and head back to yore ranch. And don't come back to town until yuh cool off. Get goin'! I'll shoot down the first man who makes a move, and I'll lock the rest of yuh up and keep yuh locked up, if necessary, till yuh trip over yore whiskers!"

Sheepishly the cowboys obeyed. Too well they knew the penalty for disobedience. The first man who reached for a gun would die. They might shoot it out to the death with Jim Hatfield, but there would be no mercy for any of them when Roaring Bill McDowell and his grim men would ride into the San Benito Valley to exact the terrible price that must be paid for a Ranger slain.

The Bar A hands sat down at the designated tables, and at once became deeply interested in a card game. Outside sounded the click of hoofs as the Cross C outfit headed for home.

Hatfield pinned the silver star on his shirt front and turned to the bar.

"Fill one up, Hardwinter," he directed.

Hardwinter Burns poured a drink with a shaking hand. "Want to buy a saloon?" he moaned. "Oh, why did I ever get into this blasted liquor business!"

"Keep Your Nose Out of My Affairs—or You'll Be the Next Hombre I'll Kill!"

THAT WAS Luther Sherrall's warning to young Bud Lockhart when Bud protested at the cold-blooded murder of an innocent rancher. Luther was building up a vast empire founded on blood, loot and fraud—and when Bud Lockhart is drawn into the grim game, the call goes out for the ready guns of Jim Hatfield, lone wolf ranger, to clean up a sinister water rights war in HELL IN PARADISE, a full-length action novel by Jackson Cole that packs a fistful of thrills.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER XIII

The Last Trick

JOHN AUDLEY was amazed and elated at learning the real status of his foreman.

"I ought to have known it, though," he declared. "Yuh got all the ear-marks of a Ranger. I should've guessed old Bill McDowell wouldn't let me down when I wrote him for help, too, rememberin' the things my dad used to say about him. Yes, I'm sure feelin' a heap better now. I've got a notion things are goin' to straighten out in this valley before long."

"Mebbe," Hatfield replied, "but they're still plenty crooked, like a sidewinder in a cactus patch."

"Uh-huh, but sidewinders in cactus patches are lucky if they come off with nothin' worse than scratches," Audley observed shrewdly. "Usually they been trapped there by one of those long-legged road-runners who's waitin' to nab 'em at the first wrong move the rattlers make. Bet things'll turn out the same right here."

"How about Brocas?" Hatfield asked. "Has he recovered consciousness?"

"Doctors say he'll pull through," Audley replied. "The bullet glanced up after hittin' his forehead just below the hair line. It was layin' near the back of his head, not much below the scalp. Brain tissues hadn't been tore, they said. They got the slug out, all right. Brocas is pretty sick, though, and the doctors won't let him talk any, or think about anythin' much. He told the sheriff he don't know who shot him. All he remembers is ridin' the trail near his ranch just about dark. All of a sudden there was a shot, and the next thing he knew he found himself in the hospital with his head tied up. It'll be hours before he can do any talkin', and the doctors say if he pulls through the next two or three days, he'll be all right, with no bad after-effects. His gal is stayin' with him now, and I'll go down again day after t'morrow. They said Brocas asked about you first thing, Hatfield, and wants to see yuh as soon as the doctors will let him."

Wainwright was also pleased at learning Hatfield was a Ranger and had been sent into the valley to investigate the trouble that was breaking. But he was still decidedly pessimistic.

"We're cleaning up that mess in the mine, repairing the pumping machinery and installing a blower system," he told the Ranger. "Why I'm doing it, though, I can't say. I hear some of Brocas' friends have got together and are going to bid in the mine at the sale. That'll mean my finish. I can't bid against those ranchers. They'll close down the workings as soon as they get control. I tried to get the railroad to lend a hand, but they won't touch it. They say the cattle shipments and other business from up here will warrant keeping the spur in operation, and they don't care to get mixed up in any local feuds. Brocas' idea, all the time, was to run us out of the country. Looks like he'll do it, all right."

"Mebbe," Hatfield agreed. "But you keep on pushin' ahead, and don't stop till he does."

Resentment over Brocas' shooting was still intense among the ranchers, but the presence of the Lone Wolf held things down. The Cross C hands had not altered their opinion that somebody connected with the Bar A was responsible for the outrage, and they didn't hesitate to say so, but they made no further move to start trouble. It was admitted that John Audley had an ironclad alibi, but it was not admitted by all that he was entirely innocent.

"If the Bar A isn't responsible, who is?" asked his accusers.

"Brocas has other enemies," the Bar A owner's defenders pointed out.

"Strange they'd wait till right this time to go gunnin' for him," was the answer.

"A mighty good time to do it," was the instant reply, "with somebody else to blame it on."

So the discussions raged, but the general attitude was one of watchful waiting.

As a result of the controversy, the coming auction of the mine property aroused interest to a white heat. It was generally conceded that the pool formed by the rancher friends of Brocas would get the mine.

"Nobody to bid against 'em," it was agreed. "Wainwright ain't got the money to buck 'em. If he had, he'd pay off the notes. Who else is there to bid?"

WHAT Wainwright privately told Hatfield tended to substantiate the general opinion.

"We've done all we can, and it isn't enough," he said. "Kirchner hasn't got any word from the people back East, and it's my opinion he won't get any. It'll just be a matter of form, the bidding. The Brocas group will bid just enough to cover the face of the notes. I can't top it. So the auctioneer will knock down the property to them and that'll settle it. Well, I can always go back to work for the railroad, but I hate to see my friends lose the money they put into the project. Maybe the time will come when I can pay it back to them. I sure hope so."

Three days before the date set for the auction, Hatfield rode to the distributing yard south of town and arranged to make the trip to the junction the following night on a wild-cat engine. The next evening he again rode to the yard, Audley accompanying him to bring back his horse.

The light engine pulled out of the yard just as dusk was falling. The train crew consisted of the engineer, fireman and one brakeman. Hatfield rode in the engine cab. He leaned against the engineer's seat and conversed with the garrulous hoghead, who complained about the evils of railroading in general and this line in particular.

Darkness was gathering and the Espantosa was a purple mystery starred with silver and laced with jet. Around them chimney rocks loomed black and forbidding, like monuments set by the hand of man, instead of what they really were—Nature's tombstones to ages long dead. Cactuses brandished weirdly deformed arms and seemed to make threatening moves in the uncertain light that filtered down from the spangled sky. Infrequent clumps of greasewood huddled together as if in fear, while here and there columns of sage, like miniature gnarled oak trees, marched in avenues as evenly spaced and regular as those laid out in a city. Nothing disturbed the silence save the lonely yipping of a hunting coyote or the forlorn hooting of an owl.

"This blasted country is enough to give a feller the willies!" complained the engineer. "Them darn cactuses seem to be reachin' out as yuh go past, and the rocks are all set to topple over on top of yuh. In the daytime it's heat like what comes off of a boiler, and dust devils dancin', and things what ain't there showin' up along the skyline. At night it's even worse. Yuh look out the window and know yuh see things, and at the same time know dadblamed well they ain't there. I can't get across too quick to suit me, and I always figger each trip is goin' to be my last. Oh, it'll get me some time, all right. I feel it in my bones."

"Reckon it isn't as bad as all that," Hatfield chuckled. "Yuh'll get used to it in time."

"Not me," disclaimed the hogger. "I ain't never goin' to get used to it. Out here it's bad enough, but down this side of the junction it's awful. The country is all busted up into hills and hollows and dark canyons. The steel crawls around through 'em like a snake tryin' to catch hold of his own tail. Why, there's places the fireman can lean out of the cab and shake hands with the conductor in the caboose at the end of a fifty-car train. Yuh darn near meet yoreself comin' back. Wait, you'll see!"

He glanced at the steam gauge, bawled profanely to the fireman for more steam and settled himself comfortably on the box. Hooking up the reverse lever a few notches he widened the throttle. The big locomotive picked up speed, reeling and rocking, its drivers clattering over the joints, its stack purring musically, its side rods clanking and clanging. A cool breeze drove through the cab. The level surface of the desert flowed monotonously past. Overhead, the great clock in the sky wheeled westward, and the silence of the desert pressed in like a tangible force, making puny and insignificant the clatter of their passing.

Hatfield slouched comfortably against the side of the cab and watched the ribbons of steel unroll in the flickering beam of the headlight. The hiss of steam, the sound of the exhaust and the monotonous clanking of the air pumps induced a feeling of drowsiness and at times he almost dozed. He was aroused as the beat of the side-rods and drivers grew louder. Glancing out, he saw that they had left the level desert and were passing through low and craggy hills that grew more rugged as the engine continued southward. The track twisted and turned in the shadow of the lowering cliffs, and the grade had appreciably increased. He knew that they were past the half-way mark of the trip.

THE engineer had fallen silent, his whole attention given to the track ahead, for the curves were sharp and his range of vision limited.

Another ten miles fell behind, and another. Hatfield walked about the cab a bit to relieve the stiffness of his limbs, said a word to the fireman and came back to the engineer's side of the cab. The engine was roaring through a deep and narrow gorge. The cliffs on the right were so close that Hatfield felt he could reach out and touch them as they whisked past. He heard the flanges screech as the wheels hit the beginning of a curve. He peered through the front window and could see but a few yards ahead as they lurched around it.

"Look out!" he roared to the engineer. His keen eyes had caught sight of something dark looming on the track ahead.

The hogger slammed his throttle shut and with the same movement twisted the brake valve handle clear around. Hatfield heard the shoes grind against the tires, felt the engine leap and buck beneath him like a living thing. Almost under the pilot loomed the dark mass that hid the shining rails.

Hatfield saw the engineer brace himself. The Ranger leaped back, gripped the coal chains with both hands and hung on with all his strength.

With a terrific crash, the speeding engine hit the obstacle. There was a grinding and splintering, a scream of tortured metal, a roar of escaping steam. Hatfield was swung clear off his feet as the derailed engine thundered from the track and turned over on its side. His grip on the chains was torn loose and he hurtled through the air, bringing up against the hot boilerhead with a force that knocked the breath out of him and set his senses reeling. A wave of blackness swept over him as he sprawled against the tilted

side of the cab. He heard a yell of fright and a scream of pain. The cab lights went out and the cab filled with billowing vapor and steam that seared the flesh.

Choking and gasping, the Ranger crawled up the sloping apron, reached the opening between the cab and the twisted tender, and sprawled through. He hit the ground on all fours, gulping in great breaths of the cool night air. For a moment he collapsed and lay gasping. Then he staggered to his feet and looked around.

The fireman was slumped on a tie end, holding his bleeding head in his hands. The brakeman was cursing and moaning as he caressed a badly bruised arm. Steam was roaring from a torn-off cylinder, making a deafening racket. More steam swirled from the cab. The engineer was nowhere in sight.

"Where's the engineer?" Hatfield shouted above the bellow of the escaping steam.

The fireman looked up with pain-filled eyes. The brakeman ceased cursing, and stared.

"My gosh, he must be inside there," the brakeman yelled. "He'll be cooked to death, if he ain't already dead."

Hatfield ripped the neckerchief from about his throat. He dipped it into a jet of cold water spurting from the shattered tank, and tied it over his nose and mouth.

"What yuh goin' to do?" the brakeman bawled as the Ranger started climbing back into the wrecked cab.

"Got to get him out," Jim Hatfield replied.

"Yuh'll get scalded to death, too!" the brakeman screamed. "One of them leakin' pipes is liable to bust plumb loose any minute. If it does yuh won't have a Chinaman's chance!"

Hatfield's reply was to plunge through the opening between cab and tender. Holding his breath, he slid along the tilted apron until he was against the lower side wall of the cab. Here, at the lowest point, the white vapor was not so thick, and not nearly so hot. He groped through the white welter until his hands encountered a limp body. It was the engineer. Hatfield quickly ascertained that he was wedged between the seatbox and the side of the boiler. He tried to free the body, but could not.

The steam was increasing as the strained joints loosened more and more, the heat growing almost unbearable. He groped about until he found the grate shaker lever, still resting in its rack. He gripped the heavy iron beam and battered the seatbox with it. The wood split, smashed. He tore the shattered planks loose and in another moment was able to shift the remains of the box. The imprisoned body fell free.

HATFIELD gripped the unconscious man and dragged him up the apron. By a mighty effort he managed to shove the body through the opening and sprawled after it. Even as he hit the ground, one of the wrenched joints gave way and scalding vapor roared into the cab.

The brakeman and the still dazed fireman dragged the engineer's body away from danger. Hatfield reeled after them. He leaned against the cliff side until his strength somewhat returned. Then he examined the unconscious man he had rescued.

"Head split open, but he's breathin'," he told the others. "Looks like his left leg might be broken—can't say for shore. How far are we from town?"

"About five miles, I'd guess," returned the shack.

"We'll have to carry him in," Hatfield decided. "As soon as that steam blows off a bit, we'll tear the end cab curtain loose and make a stretcher."

The racket of the escaping steam was already diminishing, as the pressure in the boiler lessened. While waiting for it to calm down a bit more, Hatfield and the brakeman examined the object that had derailed them. The brakeman swore a crackling oath.

"Them rocks never fell off the cliff," he declared. "They were put there by somebody. Look, you can see where they rolled 'em up onto the track. And here's a couple of ties down at the bottom of the mess. Now who could've done a thing like this? It don't make sense. What fool would want to wreck a light engine, anyhow? If this was the mainline and it was a mail train, or an express car carrying gold or a payroll, there'd be some reason for it. Why'd anybody want to do such a thing, will you tell me that?"

Hatfield had his own opinion, but he did not express it.

"Persistent hellion, all right, and he shore keeps tabs on every move I make," he muttered to himself. "Well, he's played his last card, and it wasn't high enough to take the pot. Next time, I play a winnin' hand."

A little later, with the unconscious engineer on the improvised stretcher, they set out on their five-mile tramp to town. From various indications, Hatfield had concluded that the hogger was not fatally injured. He smiled grimly to himself as they trudged through the night.

"I head for town to visit a jigger in a hospital," he chuckled, "and instead I bring 'em fresh business!" . . .

Late the night of the day preceding the auction, a locomotive drawing a single coach steamed into Mota. The coach was shunted onto a siding near the open space which fronted the mine office, and left there. Its window blinds were drawn and there was no sign of life about it other than a white-coated colored porter who from time to time stuck a woolly head out the front

door to roll apprehensive eyes at the boisterous cowtown.

The shades were still drawn the following morning. The porter pottered about the front platform, disappearing inside the coach from time to time. It appeared, in the light of day, to be a combination dining and sleeping car, for smoke trickled from a pipe in the rear and there arose an appetizing smell of steaming coffee and frying meat in its vicinity.

The morning was bright and beautiful, with a golden sun shining down from the blue Texas sky. The forests were clad in their Autumn dress of scarlet and of gold. The far hills were swathed in mystic purple. The Espantosa Desert appeared to be a sea of molten bronze flecked with amethyst and jade and pulsing scarlet. The Haunted Hills loomed dark and ominous, their shadows as black and clearly defined as the crags themselves. The San Benito flowed green and lovely between its towering russet walls.

Already the trail down the valley was dotted with horsemen, for the auction was set at ten o'clock and the ranchers and their hands were flocking to town to attend it.

Mota wore an air of tense expectancy. The outcome of the auction was of interest, although it was generally conceded that the only bidding would be by the group of ranch owners who had decided to act in the absence of Clate Brocas. What might happen afterward was a matter of conjecture. Nobody knew for sure just what were Brocas' plans relative to the mining property. The miners and their families stood about in disconsolate groups, for it was believed that he would close the mine as soon as the property came under his control.

ON THE open space in front of the mine office, the auctioneer set up his stand and table, with pens and ink and papers. Several chairs stood back of the table. On the siding, nearby, the railroad coach stood with blinds drawn and no sign of tenancy.

Gradually the crowd collected. The auctioneer, fat and fussy, bustled forward, took up his place at the stand. He fiddled with the papers on the table, arranged them with great nicety, shifted pens and ink to his liking, shifted them back again, drew forth a huge red handkerchief and blew his nose with great violence. Then he solemnly removed his hat, placed it on the table and mounted the stand. He glanced about with much importance, raised the hammer he held in a plump hand, rolled out a long and intricate description of the property to be sold, and started the bidding.

The spokesman for the ranch owners stepped forward and bid the exact amount of the notes held by Brocas. The auctioneer nodded complacently, raised his hammer with a gesture of finality, and chanted.

"Goin' — goin' — goin' at — all done, gentlemen? Goin' — goin' —"

"And a thousand better," spoke a voice from one side.

The auctioneer stared. Glances were turned toward two quiet, sallow-faced men dressed in long black coats, white shirt fronts and black string ties.

The auctioneer hesitated before repeating the bid. He glanced questioningly at the group of ranchers.

One of the black-clad men stepped forward. He laid a paper on the table in front of the auctioneer.

"There's my letter of credit from the bank at the junction," he said clearly. "Yuh'll see it's considerable more than covers my bid."

The auctioneer glanced at the letter.

"That's right!—That's right!" he hastened to assure the speaker in oily tones. He raised his hammer, and once more his raucous chant grated through the rising hum of conversation.

"Goin' — goin' — goin' at —"

"And a thousand," interpolated the spokesman for the ranchers.

"And a thousand better," instantly countered the black-clad man.

The auctioneer laid down his hammer and rubbed his fat hands together.

"This is better, gents," he smirked. "This is somethin' like. Goin'—goin'—goin'—"

The rancher bettered the last bid, and the man in gambler's clothes came right back at him. For several minutes the bidding was spirited, while the crowd chattered with excitement and conjecture, shooting questioning glances at the two stranger bidders who consistently topped the rancher's figures.

Finally the ranchers hesitated, buzzed together. The spokesman stepped forward a pace, regretfully shook his head.

"Reckon we've gone about as far as we feel able," he said. "We can't afford to sink too much dinero in a hole-in-the-ground. Reckon what happens now is Brocas' lookout."

The auctioneer raised his hammer. "Goin' —goin'—goin' at—"

"See that, and raise the ante five thousand!" boomed a voice from the coach on the siding.

CHAPTER XIV

The Pay-Off

QUICKLY the eyes of every person present turned toward the coach Clate Brocas stood in the door, his head swathed in bandages, leaning on Jim Hatfield's arm. Nearby hovered his daughter, Marie. John Audley brought up the rear.

Brocas slowly descended the coach steps, walked, a trifle unsteadily, to the auctioneer's table, and sat down He fixed the stranger bidders with his steely eyes.

"Step along, gents," he said placidly. "I aims to keep pace with yuh for quite a spell. Might as well warn yuh, though, the next raise is goin' to be ten thousand, so twirl a wide loop."

The two bidders glared at him, conversed a moment in low tones.

"Reckon we've gone as far as we can," one replied in sullen tones.

The auctioneer raised his hammer. "Goin' — goin' — gone!" Whack! The hammer smacked on the table. "Sold to Mr. Clate Brocas!"

He stepped down, rubbing his palms. Brocas gestured to the pen and ink.

"Write out the bill of sale," he directed.

The auctioneer complied, scribbling away at a great rate. He waved the completed paper to dry it. Brocas reached for the pen and ink.

"Here's my check for the amount, less the face of the notes," he said.

The auctioneer handed him the bill of sale with a flourish.

"Yuh're in the coal minin' business, sir," he said to the rancher.

Clate Brocas took the bill. "Reckon not," he said. "I just put some spare cash into a good investment." Deliberately he tore the paper across, tore it across a second time and cast the fragments on the ground.

"Harrison Wainwright is still in the coal business, where he belongs," the big rancher remarked. "He's got some more workin' capital on hand now, that's all. He can pay those notes off when he's able, and I don't give a hang when that is!"

"But I don't understand!" gurgled the popeyed auctioneer.

The two stranger bidders bellowed angry protest.

"This is a plain case of fraud," cried one. "Brocas never intended to buy."

As the auctioneer hesitated, another man rushed forward to the table. It was Wood Kirchner, manager of the Imperial mine. He wasn't smiling now. His face was contorted, his eyes blazing with anger.

"I demand a re-sale, and I demand that Brocas be disqualified as a bidder!" he shouted. "This is an outrage!"

Jim Hatfield, standing to one side of the table, raised his voice.

"There won't be any re-sale," he said. "If there was, you and yore tinhorn sidekicks won't bid in it." His voice rang out again, steely, clear, slicing through the babble of the excited crowd like a silver knife through clabber.

"In the name of the State of Texas! I arrest you for the murder of one Tom Graham, once foreman of the Bar A spread." His hard gaze had shifted to Kirchner. "Which reminds me — have yuh got another one of those rattlesnake pictures in yore pocket? If yuh have, yuh might use it to blow yoreself to fragments — Berne Matthews!"

Wood Kirchner stiffened. At the sound of that name on the Ranger's lips, his jaw dropped. Then his face went livid. His eyes blazed even brighter with maniacal fury. He shrieked a curse, and his hand streaked to the gun hanging low on his right hip.

Jim Hatfield shot just as the other man's gun cleared leather. Kirchner reeled back as the heavy slug took him in the breast. He straightened, raised himself on top-toe, clutched madly in the air, as if to seize his own escaping soul, and crashed to the ground.

Instantly Hatfield's left-hand gun covered the two bidders.

"Sheriff, tie on to those two outlaws," he cried in ringing tones. "They're under arrest too, for aidin' and abettin' this hellion in his crimes. Lock 'em up! Better search 'em first, though. Yuh'll probably find criminal evidence in their duds, as well as a couple of Derringers."

THE sheriff bustled forward from the outskirts of the crowd, secured his prisoners and disarmed them.

As he led them off to the lockup, Jim Hatfield followed.

"Wait for me here, I'll be back in a few minutes," he told Brocas and smiled at Harrison Wainwright, who was white to the lips at the bloody doings.

Hatfield was back in less than half an hour. The crowd was milling about excitedly, discussing the stirring happenings. Brocas and Wainwright were seated at the table, smoking and chatting. Audley and Marie sat close together nearby.

"Those two fellers talked," Hatfield remarked, sitting down at the table. "They substantiated what I'd already figgered out, and tied up a few loose ends."

"Suppose," suggested Brocas, "yuh give us the rights of what this is all about. Why did yuh call Kirchner by the name of Berne Matthews?"

Hatfield smiled. He fished out a sack of tobacco and brown papers, and rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand, lighted it and drew in a deep and satisfying lungful of smoke.

From his pocket he took two folded papers, which he opened and spread face downward on the table.

"Because that happened to be his name," he answered Brocas. "It wasn't Kirchner, never was." He turned over one of the papers, smoothed it out.

"As yuh can see by this telegram from the Pittsburgh and Barboursville people, there was a Wood Kirchner workin' for them, their

consulting engineer, but he died three years back. The man who's been posin' here as Kirchner was his assistant, Berne Matthews, and, as the telegram says, a high-class chemist. That's the only regret I have for pluggin' him — puttin' that brain of his out of commission. Yes, he was smart, and if he'd walked a straight trail, the chances are he'd have gone a long way. But I reckon he was just born a criminal—couldn't go straight. Took to gamblin' and got bad in debt. Chances are he used money that didn't belong to him, too, and folks were beginnin' to close in on him. I'm of the opinion, though I don't reckon it can ever be proved, that he murdered Wood Kirchner, his boss. Anyhow, he stole Kirchner's letters of recommendation, his certificates, and so on. Trailed his rope right after Kirchner died, and dropped plumb out of sight. Finally drifted over this direction, where, unless I'm a heap mistaken, he came from originally. Got mixed up with gamblers again and, according to what those two tinhorn sidekicks of his told me, cleaned up a right nice pile of dinero by way of crooked games. Wasn't satisfied, though. Always lookin' for more, and not at all squeamish how he got it. Was at loose ends when he drifted out to this valley and ran onto Wainwright, and needed to lay off the gamblin' business for a spell.

"When he found out Wainwright was lookin' for a minin' engineer, he pulled out his phony recommendations from the Pittsburgh, Barboursville people, the ones he stole from Kirchner, claimed to be Kirchner, and signed up with Wainwright. Figgered on going respectable for a while until his bad record in the gambling business was forgotten. Made the survey Wainwright wanted and turned in a favorable report.

"But in the course of making that survey, he stumbled onto something — something that made him want to get control of Wainwright's property mighty bad. If Wainwright hadn't already bought the land and paid for it, the chances are he would have turned in an unfavorable report, figgerin' Wainwright would lose interest and leave him a clear field. But he knew that after he'd paid his money down for the property, Wainwright wouldn't give up the project on the word of one engineer. He would've hired another one to check on Kirchner's findin's, and of course that would have given Kirchner away. So he turned in the good report and started schemin' how to get control of the property. Things played into his hands, too. The row between Wainwright and you, Brocas, was pie to him. He got busy and started doin' everything he could to keep that row boilin'. Got in touch with some of his former gamblin' partners and set them to work, too."

"It was Kirchner blew up the bridge?" Audley put in quickly.

HATFIELD nodded. "That's right," he said. "It was also Kirchner, as he called himself, who tried to down me that night in the Chinese' place, and again when he mighty near burned me to a cinder, up in the canyon, like I told yuh about, after he'd slipped up at drygulchin' me from the cliff top. He tried it again down in the mine, then again when his hellions wrecked that engine I was ridin'. That second explosion while we were down in the mine, Wainwright, wasn't coal dust, like the first one, although I'm not plumb shore about the first one, either. After that second blast, I smelled dynamite fumes plain as anything. The rest of you fellers were too excited to notice. I knew, then, that Kirchner had played another trump. And he came mighty close taking the last trick with it, too. Funny thing, the very stuff he tried to kill me with, saved us—those sheets of paper yuh saw me stuff into the powder hole, Wainwright."

"I was wanting to ask you about that again," Wainwright exclaimed. "I remember you just laughed the first time I asked you about it and said you'd tell me some day."

"What did yuh mean by that rattlesnake picture business yuh mentioned to Kirchner just before yuh plugged him?" Brocas asked.

Briefly, Hatfield told of the explosion in Captain McDowell's office, and explained the workings of the lethal sheets.

"That was more of Kirchner's smart chemical work," he added. "He had something there. Just how he mixed the ingredients to get the results he did, I don't know, and now that the last of the drawings is destroyed, chances are I'll never find out."

"But why did he mail yuh those pictures before yuh showed up here in San Benito?" asked Brocas. "Did he already have a grudge against yuh or somethin'?"

"He was a smart hombre, and he had foresight, something the ordinary run of criminals don't often have. He knew, of course, that with all the trouble which was bustin' loose over here, sooner or later a Ranger would be sent to investigate. He evidently knew about me, knew I was Bill McDowell's trouble shooter and due to be back at the post about the time Wainwright wrote his first letter to Ranger headquarters. He must have guessed I'd be the man Cap Bill would send. He may have known, too, that I have considerable engineering knowledge, and that if anybody would catch on to what he was after, I'd likely enough be the man. So he set to work to get me out of the way first off. Came close to doin' it, too."

He paused to roll another cigarette.

"Funny how things work out, though," he resumed. "I know darn well Cap Bill sent me over here just to get me out of Franklin for a spell. If Kirchner hadn't sent me those darn snakes, I might never have been handed this chore. Plenty of other Ranger work on

hand right now. So when Cap Bill shoved me out of town figgering I'd have a better chance against an unknown and dangerous enemy, he sent me right to him by accident. Kirchner must have got a big jolt when he found I was in town. Yep, he recognized me right away, all right, and tried to fix me pronto."

"He put that stuff in the water tank to delay the railroad building?" asked Wainwright.

"Uh-huh, that's one of the things that gave me a line on him. I couldn't see how a cowman, like Brocas, for instance, would know chemistry well enough to try a thing like that. It told me at once that it was a trained chemist and engineer I'd have to find. I already knew Kirchner was a specialist in chemicals, from his work and laboratory equipment in the mine office, so I'd already begun to wonder about him. It didn't take me long to figger him out, although I didn't have a thing on him, yet."

"How'd yuh come to get suspicious of him in the first place?" Audley asked.

"From the way he talked. He claimed to be a Pennsylvanian, but he didn't talk like an Easterner, although he tried to. Every now and then he would slip up and slide in a word, or speak a word, in a way that was plumb Western. That set me to thinking. It meant that Kirchner was lyin' about where he came from, and when a gent lies about his past, I've found out he'll bear watchin'."

"That's something I want to ask about right now," put in Wainwright. "Why in blazes would he go so far as committing murder to get this coal mine? Sure it'll make some money—make me a living, and pay my friends something on their investment, but it won't ever make anybody rich. An engineer like Kirchner would know that at once. Why did he want the coal mine so bad?"

THE Ranger had been expecting that question. He smiled.

"Did yuh ever hear of the Tombstone silver mines, Wainwright?" he asked. "Over east of the San Pedro Valley, in Arizona, is a range of hills a lot like these here. They're ugly, dreary, monotonous, and don't look to be worth anything. Nobody paid them any attention for hundreds of years. Coronado and his Spaniards, huntin' for the riches of the Seven Cities of Cibola, passed them by with hardly a glance, and all the time they were richer than a hundred cities of Cibola. Prospectors looked 'em over, and passed them up. Then also came Ed Schiefflin. He stuck a pick in the right place and found out what those poverty-looking hills really were. They were hills of silver. Schiefflin and his friends took millions out of them before they tapped an underground river and the water rose in the mines and made operating impossible. These Haunted Hills here are much the same as the Tombstone hills."

"You mean there's silver in these ridges?" Wainwright exclaimed excitedly.

Hatfield smiled and shook his head. "Nope. No gold, no silver. That's why prospectors on the lookout for gold and silver gave them up long ago. The Tombstone hills were hills of silver. These are hills of copper."

"Copper!"

"Yep, those cliffs up there are Bornite ore." He turned over the second paper. "Here is the assay on specimens taken from the cliffs back on yore property, Audley—the veins run us there, too. They show the Bornite ore there is even richer in copper than the ore at Bisbee, Arizona. It means this valley some day will be bigger and busier than Bisbee ever was, after you fellers get busy and develop yore mines. The coal deposit down at this end is just a sort of geological freak. I've a notion the veins are short, and will soon peter out. But the copper is a different matter. That's what Kirchner was after."

"But how in blazes did you discover it?" Brocas wanted to know.

"Audley, you remember me sayin', up in the canyon that day, that I seemed to recall tastin' bitter water like that somewhere? Well, all of a sudden it came to me. I'd tasted water like that over at Bisbee once when I'd gone after an outlaw we had extradition papers for. The water tasted that way because it ran through copper bearing rocks. Then I examined the rocks at the bottom of the spring and decided they were Bornite. Got me some specimens durin' the trip when that hellion nearly burned me up in the canyon, and sent them over to Bisbee to have them assayed. The assay showed I was right."

Wainwright glanced at the assay figures, gave a long whistle

"No wonder Kirchner — or Matthews — was willing to do murder to get it," he commented.

"Yes," Hatfield replied. "He reckoned if he managed to run you out, the mine would close down and nobody else would bother with it. Then he'd be able to buy up the land cheap. He hoped to delay you until yuh couldn't meet the notes when they fell due. After you'd gone broke, his plan was to make yuh an offer, knowin' yuh'd be plumb glad to salvage anything yuh could from the wreck. His sidekicks would've managed it, while he kept in the background, out of sight. But when he saw Brocas and me had got together, he figgered he was sunk. So he drygulches Brocas. Of course, he never foresaw any auction, but when it was staged, he still thought he could outbid the ranchers, who weren't goin' to sink too much dinero into something they didn't want. His plot came pretty near succeedin', too. The catch, how-

ever, was that Brocas didn't die."

"Take more'n a sidewinder like that to make me cash my chips," growled the old rancher.

Hatfield stood up, and smiled down at them from his great height.

"Well, reckon that's about all," he said. "Old Goldy and me will be trailin' along, now. Captain Bill has another little chore ready for us when we get back to headquarters."

"I sure hope yuh drop along this way again, soon," exclaimed Brocas. "Yuh'll always be more than welcome at my place, son. And if yuh ever take a notion to quit the Rangers and settle down, why yuh know right where to come."

"Gracious!" Hatfield replied. He glanced teasingly at Marie Brocas, who blushed under his regard.

"I've a notion, Clate, that the next time I happen along this way, yuh'll be too busy playin' grandpa to pay any attention to me," said the Ranger Lieutenant. "Adios, folks!"

They watched him ride away, tall and graceful atop his splendid golden horse, the level rays of the low-lying sun etching his stern profile in flame — to where duty and danger and new adventure waited.

FURTHER EXPLOITS OF RANGER JIM HATFIELD IN

HELL IN PARADISE

By

JACKSON COLE

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

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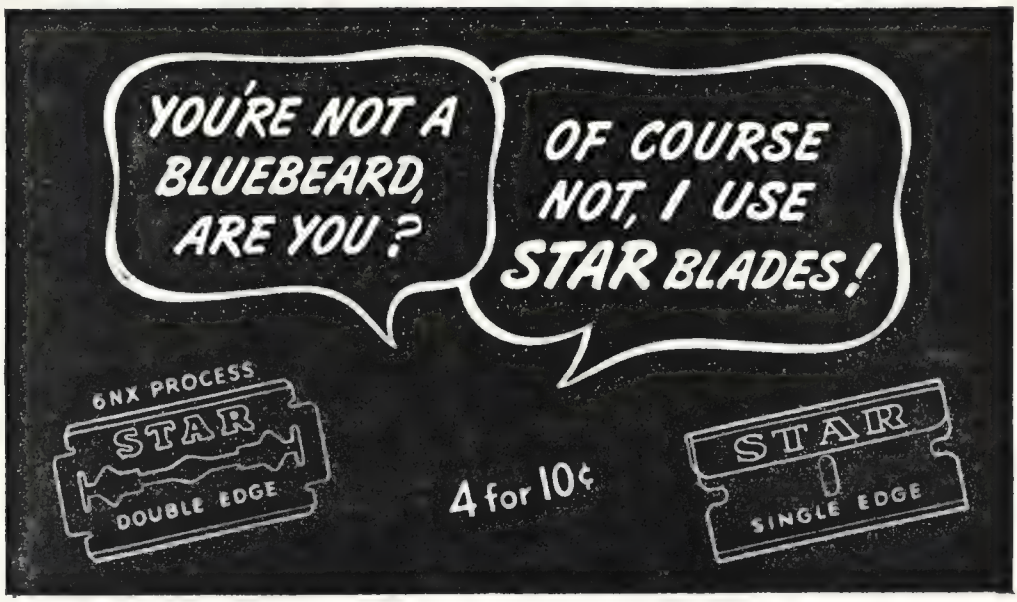

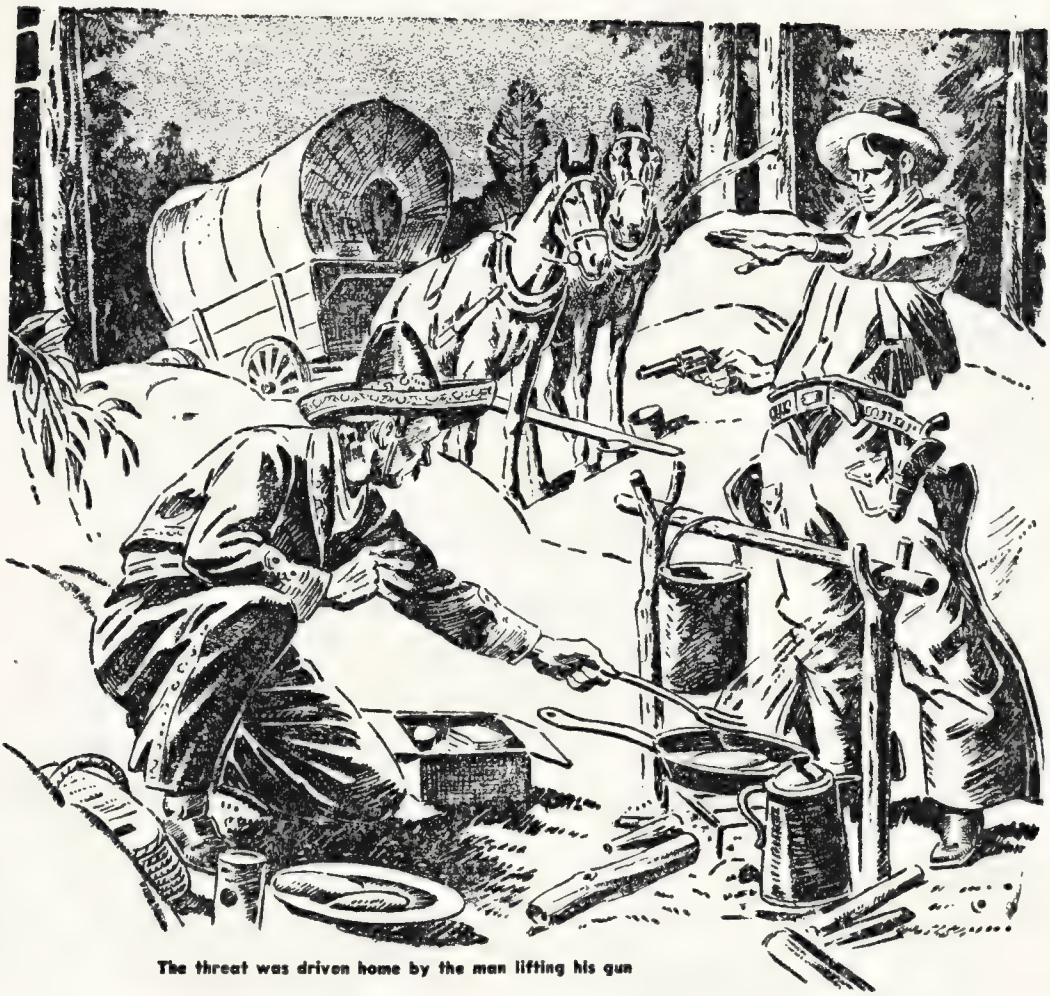

The threat was driven home by the man lifting his gun

Sweet Are the Uses of Sorghum

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Chili Joe has his own way of handling a rambunctious bandit after a stick-up—and it is a humdinger!

FAT little "Chili Joe" Garcia was over at the county seat when he heard about the robbery back in Adobe Wells where he ran his restaurant. He went to the county seat every few weeks, driving a wagon and a team of borrowed mules which he used to haul supplies back home. It was quite a long trip, but it saved José a few dollars, and it made it possible for him to serve real Mexican food, not imitation stuff.

Besides, Joe liked the outing. But the news of the robbery saddened him.

He heard it from the man who ran the mill, just as he was leaving to drive back home. The miller had heard it from a man who got it from the sheriff, who had heard it from an Adobe Wells man.

"It was pretty bad," the miller had told Joe. "Them Gaylord brothers and their men. The deputy sheriff put out a trap for them, but it didn't work right because Gaylord found out about it. There was a lot of people killed. Gaylord's brother and some of his men are dead, and the cashier of the bank and two special deputies are dead, but Virgil Gaylord and a few of his men escaped. They said they was comin' back to Adobe Wells and kill everybody in it for killin' Kerr Gaylord. They are bad men, José."

So José Garcia drove his team toward Adobe Wells with a sad heart. He was proud of his American citizenship, and it hurt him that Americans should be "so bad hombres" occasionally. Adobe Wells would mourn its dead this night, and José did not like things that brought weeping to women and sorrow to his friends and neighbors.

But, Joe sadly reflected, there was nothing he could do about it. He was not a fighting man. His wife Maria did not like him to get mad and make the fight. The truth of the matter was, he did not like to get mad himself, for he knew that he was not a brave man. He was a simple sheepherder who had worked hard and got himself a little restaurant where people could buy real Mexican food such as he and his Maria could cook for them.

He reached Turtle Creek by dark and made his camp where he always made it on these trips, and settled down for the night. While he slept in peace, Maria, who knew that bandits were roaming the country while posses searched for them, spent long hours praying for José and crying and wringing her hands.

Chili Joe awoke at dawn, watered his hobbled mules and washed his face in the clear cool creek, then set about getting his breakfast.

He was contemptuous of imitation Mexican food, and he would neither eat it nor serve it to his patrons. For instance, there was the matter of *tortillas*. There were plenty of people who made them either out of white wheat flour or out of cornmeal and called them *tortillas*. This was a blasphemy and a fraud, and no honest person would do such a thing. There were even Mexicans who would put over such a fraud on their patrons, but not José Garcia.

WHEN Chili Joe made tortillas he made them right. That was why he went to the county seat. There was a Mexican quarter there, and from the miller he could get real sorghum flour. A *tortilla* was not a *tortilla* if it were made out of anything else.

His friend, the miller, bought this sorghum grain and ground it himself and made real sorghum flour for people who had enough discrimination to want the real thing. And there was another Mexican who knew how to take the fresh green stalk of the wonderful sorghum plant and grind it and boil it down and make real syrup, not the cheap mixture of corn and sorghum which you bought in stores, but the thick, black, rich kind of sorghum which was fit food for the gods.

Hot *tortillas* and sorghum molasses and butter and coffee. Ah, there was food for a man, and Chili Joe would serve nothing else to his customers or to himself. Even in camp, Joe had his *tortillas* and syrup and butter and coffee. For didn't he have a wagon-load of it with him.

Joe's breakfast fire was burned down to coals, the coffee boiling, and he had half a dozen *tortillas* patted out ready to cook. The mules were eating their oats out of nose bags tied to the wagon tongue so they wouldn't wander away again.

José was greasing the skillet preparatory to putting it on the fire when suddenly he realized he was not alone. A man had been standing just behind a tree, watching him for some time. Now the man stepped out and approached the Mexican squatting beside his fire.

Joe looked at him and got to worrying. The man didn't look so good. He was tall and lean and wind-burned, and there was a mean look about his sharp eyes. The man also looked tired, and maybe dangerous. Joe thought he might be one of the bandits, and that made Joe scared.

"Just havin' breakfast, huh?" the man said. "Well, I got a little job for yuh before we eat."

Joe resorted to a trick used all over the world by men in foreign lands when they don't want to understand too much.

"No speaka too mucha English," he answered.

"You ain't foolin' nobody," the man answered. "I seen yuh in Adobe Wells. Just come on with me now and yuh won't have no trouble. Or have I got to make yuh come?"

The threat was driven home by the man lifting his gun out of the scabbard which hung on his thigh.

Chili Joe got to his feet. A gun made him impatient, but he never argued with one.

"What you want?" he asked.

"That's better. Just take this trail up the creek a piece. I got a job for yuh."

Joe followed the thinly marked footpath up the creek bank for two hundred yards, the mean man following just behind him. Then the man directed him off to the left, and they went another hundred yards through the woods to a small clearing.

Joe saw a sweated bay horse lying on his side, panting. Near the horse was a saddle which the man had recently taken off the animal, and a gunny-sack partially filled and tied around the neck.

Joe looked at the horse, saw his leg was broken, and then saw a prairie dog hole nearby.

"You got to kill him," Joe said, realizing how the animal was suffering. "How about you shoot him, huh?"

"I don't want no shootin' around here," the man answered. Then he added significantly, "unless it's necessary. Now pick up that saddle and bring it back to yore camp and put it on one of yore mules."

Joe's reaction was prompt.

"I no do that," he answered. "That mule, he no belong for me."

"Look," the man answered. "I ain't had my beauty sleep, and that makes me cross. Now pick up that saddle like I tell yuh."

The man had again lifted his pouched gun, and Chili Joe saw it and the man's face. He picked up the saddle, flung it over his shoulder and started back to his camp. The man followed, carrying his gun in one hand and the gunny-sack in the other. At the camp, he sized up the two mules, pointed to the best one and made Joe put the saddle on him.

"Now, just finish cookin' them *tortillas* and we'll have breakfast," the man ordered. "Looks like yuh got enough in that wagon so's not to miss a little."

The mean-looking man sat on the tongue of the wagon, with the gunny-sack at his feet and directed Chili Joe in the cooking of the *tortillas*, keeping his gun in his hand. He made Joe set up a box for a table, and made him break open one of his thirty-pound butter tubs and dig out some butter for him.

Joe worked without spoken protest, but he was worried. Maria would not like this, and he would be in real trouble when the man rode the borrowed mule away. Joe would have to pay for it, and it would cost him a lot of money. Joe wished the man would hurry up and eat and go away and leave him with his troubles.

JOE finally had the *tortillas* stacked on a tin plate, hot from the pan, and the stack oozing golden droplets of melted butter. Beside the plate on the box, he set a tin cup of hot black coffee.

The lean man looked at the breakfast and his face broke into a twisted grin.

"Now that's somethin' like it," he said.

He pulled another box up to the makeshift table and sat down. He laid his gun down beside his plate within easy reach of his hand, and picked up a knife and fork.

He cut a wedge out of the stack of *tortillas* and shoveled them into his mouth. He chewed them a moment, then his lean jaws stopped in mid-chew. His face twisted into a frown as he tentatively investigated the flavor of his breakfast. He spat the bite out on the ground.

"What the devil is this stuff?" he barked.

Chili Joe shrugged. *"Tortillas,"* he answered.

"I never tasted none that tasted like that. There ain't no corn meal in these here things."

"No," Chili Joe said with pride. "Is real *tortillas*. Sorghum flour. Corn meal *tortillas*, shesa no good."

"This stuff ain't no good," the man growled. "It ain't fit for nothin' to eat except mebbe Mexicans and dogs."

Offended to the depths of his artistic soul, Chili Joe opened his mouth to protest this insult to his ability, but the sight of the gun changed his mind. He was getting mad, though. The man had gone too far with him now. Joe could stand a lot of abuse, but this latest insult was unforgivable.

The man was speaking again, but Joe hardly heard him.

"I said," the man repeated, "didn't I see some sorghum syrup in that wagon? Answer me, Mex."

"Si," Joe answered, his mind in a fog. He felt as though he were going to be real mad, and Maria wouldn't like it.

"Then get me some of them molasses and let me drown out the taste of this sawdust, or mill sweepin's, or whatever these things is made out of. And hurry up. I ain't got all day."

Like a sleepwalker imagining himself walking along the edge of a high precipice, Chili Joe obeyed. He crawled into the wagon, got out a two-gallon bucket of molasses and climbed down off the wagon wheel. He set the bucket on the ground and pried the lid off.

"Now," his unwelcome guest ordered, "gimme them molasses. Gimme lots of 'em."

"Si, senor," Joe answered, lifting the bucket. "I give you lots of 'em."

Joe poured out the molasses—not in the man's plate, but over his head!

He dumped the pail upside down on the man's skull and jammed it down over his head like a tin helmet. The thick syrup instantly engulfed the man's face, filling his eyes, his nose and his open mouth. It ran down the back of his neck, down his chin, and saturated the hair on his chest.

The man yelled and clawed at the bucket with both hands. His voice had a gurgling sound as the sticky sorghum strangled him. The man jumped up off his box, knocking it over backward.

Joe had suddenly become like a wild man. His hands had hardly finished their task of jamming the bucket on the man's head, when Joe kicked over the box containing the plate and the gun. The gun fell out of the blinded man's reach, and Joe dived for it. He picked up the weapon and turned it on the man.

But the lean man was not a serious menace at the moment. He had clawed the bucket off his head, but he was jumping around on one foot and then another, cursing and gouging his eyes with his fists. His eyes were closed, and there was not much likelihood of his opening them soon.

Joe had never shot a .45 in his life, and he was afraid of the gun, but he managed to keep the man covered, though there was no need of it at the time.

Blinded, the lean man was running around in circles, making the air blue with his curses. He bumped into the rear end of the saddled mule tied to the wagon tongue. One spur roweled one of the animal's hocks.

The mule responded as generations of his ancestors had done. He elevated his stern slightly as his two hind feet drew up under him and shot out backward. They caught the lean man in the seat of his levis and lifted him in a graceful arc, in the general direction of the wagon bed. The bandit landed head downward with his forehead thumping against the steel tire of the front wagon wheel. Then he fell in a heap on the ground and lay still, knocked cold by the wagon tire.

Chili Joe stood puzzled and frightened, thinking the man was dead and that he had killed him. Finally, he got nerve enough to go and feel the man's pulse. The man was alive.

This relieved Joe of one trouble, but presented another. When the man regained consciousness he would be dangerous. Joe didn't feel much confidence in the gun he still had in his hand.

BUT something had to be done quickly. Joe looked around, went and took the halter rope off one of the mules and with it tied the man's two hands and two feet together in one group in front of him, as a man would tie a calf. Then he hoisted the man into the wagon, took the saddle off the mule and harnessed the team to the wagon.

He had come to a conclusion. He had to get the man to town and into the hands of the officers so the officers could see that the man didn't hurt him when he came to his senses. With this in mind, Joe climbed up onto the wagon seat.

He looked around his camp, then got down off the wagon and went back up the trail along the creek and shot the horse with the broken leg, so that the animal would not lie there and suffer.

Then he came back and headed his wagon and team for Adobe Wells. . . .

It was a couple of hours by sun when Joe saw the group of horsemen. When they rode up, kind of scattered out, and with rifles leaned across their saddles, Joe recognized the sheriff, and the men recognized the little Mexican and put their rifles back into their saddle-boots.

"Howdy, Joe," the sheriff greeted him. "Didn't see anything of a long, tall, mean-lookin' rannie, did yuh? Or anybody else that looked suspicious?"

The sheriff was looking at the big .45 that Joe wore in the waistband of his pants, as he had seen some men do. The lawman told Joe briefly what had happened in town.

"Maybe this is him," Joe said. He lifted up the gray tarp which covered his groceries. "Thisa man, he's plenty bad."

He told the sheriff what had happened.

The posse got off their horses and looked at the captive. The lean man lay hogtied in the wagon bed, his head and the upper part of his body a dirty mixture of syrup and dead leaves and gravel and river-bed soil.

They dragged him out onto the ground and wiped off his face with a gunny-sack as best they could.

"It's Virgil Gaylord he's caught all right," the sheriff ejaculated. He turned to Joe, who still sat on the wagon seat. "Didn't see any of that hundred thousand dollars he got, did yuh?"

Chili Joe thought a moment, then threw out the feed sack which the man had been carrying when he came into camp.

"It may be in here," Joe said. "I didn't look because whatever was in it wasn't mine."

The sheriff found the sack a third full of stacked currency. Joe gulped when he saw how much money had been in his keeping without his knowing it.

"Chili," the sheriff said, "yuh shore done a favor to the folks in Adobe Wells, and I reckon they won't forget it. Not to mention some reward money."

Joe thought of the implications of this. He didn't want the news to get out about what he had done.

"Sheriff," he pleaded, "maybe you will just say you caught him. If my Maria finds out I get mad, she will—how you call—bawl me out. She no lika me fight."

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Next Issue: TUMBLE WEED, an Exciting Action Yarn by CHUCK MARTIN

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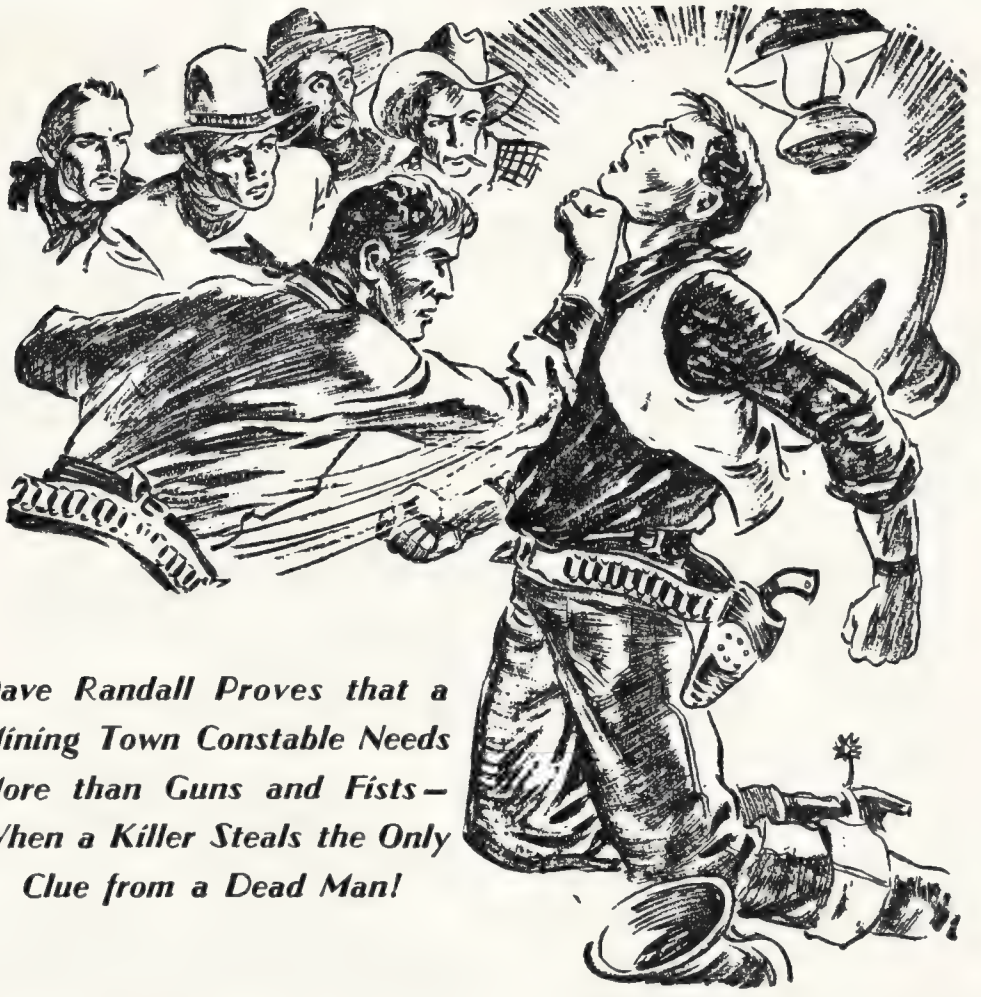
STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of TEXAS RANGERS, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1944. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared M. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of TEXAS RANGERS, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; M. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 3rd day of October, 1944. Eugene Wechsler. My commission expires March 30th, 1945.



Dave Randall Proves that a Mining Town Constable Needs More than Guns and Fists— When a Killer Steals the Only Clue from a Dead Man!

Randall's big fist smashed the killer under the chin

LAWMAN'S CHANCE

By E. E. HALLERAN

DAVE RANDALL sat up in bed as the westbound passenger train heralded itself noisily in the lower valley. His broad face broke into a slow smile.

"Goin' to rain," he said aloud, swinging a pair of oversize feet to the bare floor.

Then he smiled again, a bit ruefully, and reached for his shirt. Two years of work as Placer Gap's constable had given him precious little opportunity to use his carefully cultivated powers of logic. Crime in Placer Gap was inclined to be noisy and violent, requiring quick guns and heavy fists rather than fancy detective ability.

The respectable citizens had pinned a badge on Dave Randall because he was a burly, good-natured young fellow. They had seen him shoot it out with wandering killers, and subdue roistering miners with his fists. What they did not suspect was his gnawing ambition to use his brains.

That matter of the train whistle illustrated the way he had to practise his talents in secret. Randall usually awakened when the train clanked into town. Its noisy noontime arrival made an excellent alarm clock for a man who spent the night hours on duty.

Today the echo came dull and slowly. So Dave reasoned that there must be a low cloud-ceiling, blanketing the valley and delaying the sound to his ears. Hence, his weather forecast.

He was half dressed and heading for the cracked wash basin when another sound caught his ear. It was the distant murmur

of many voices, an ominous note to a man who constantly guards against trouble.

He took one look from the window, grabbed hat and gun belt, and jumped into the hotel hall. Bounding down the Placer House steps three at a time, he almost collided with a dusty little man who had just tied his horse to the hitching rack.

The little man dodged to avoid the constable's hurrying bulk.

"Howdy, Musclebound," Shorty Pell greeted the lawman. "What gets our brave defender outa the hay so early?"

Shorty was an irritating little crook, a gambler who covered his real profession by posing as a miner. One of the leaders of a crowd who wanted to get rid of Randall, Shorty never missed an opportunity to be scornful and irritating.

But Randall took no time to answer him today. The train was already laboring up the grade, and the depot platform was milling with excitement. Such a crowd did not meet the train out of mere curiosity. Randall wanted to be on hand if trouble broke out.

Although he sprinted down the dusty street, the train won the race to the depot, and it ground to a halt as Randall rounded the telegraph office at the end of the platform. He could hear men shouting at one another in mingled excitement and derision, then he saw somewhere in the center of the crowd a struggle taking place.

The constable went into the fracas fast, big hands scooping men away as he cleared a path. In his anxiety to keep the peace he did not notice that the men who gave way before him wore amused grins. In a matter of seconds his fingers gripped the necks of two men who were wrestling for possession of a suitcase.

"Drop it, boys!" Randall ordered "This ain't—"

He broke off abruptly, aware that two distinctly attractive brown eyes were staring at him in puzzled amusement.

"Why, the riot?" a girl asked, her voice pleasant for all its edge of impatience. "It's nice of you to welcome me home, Constable Randall, but you don't have to cause a Civil War over my baggage."'

Randall's broad face reddened. "Hello, Sally," he said in some confusion. "I didn't know this was a social affair. I just saw these here mud-diggers milling around."

"So you busted in without thinkin', interrupted one of the raw-boned hombres whom the constable's fingers released. "Your regular way o' doin' business."

For the first time, Randall realized he had laid violent hands on the man who was slated to oppose him as candidate for town constable. It was Dan Higgins, who would use the incident as campaign ammunition.

Randall ignored Higgins to speak to the girl. "Looks like everybody in Placer Gap but me knew you were coming to town."

There was a trace of reproof in the constable's remark and the girl seemed to realize it. Sally Tucker had been pretty friendly with Dave Randall before she went East.

"More brilliance on the part of our constable, Sally," Higgins cut in again. "The telegraph operator had a little trouble findin' Mike Todd to deliver your wire to your pa. Word got around to everybody but the smart Aleck what's supposed to know everything.

Several men in the crowd laughed. Sally Tucker avoided Randall's gaze. He could not tell whether she was irritated to find him making a fool of himself, or because her own arrival had been made an occasion for cheap political speeches. One way or another, she was not pleased.

BEFORE Randall could defend himself, however, there was an interruption. A rider came whirling through town just ahead of a cloud of dust.

Something in the newcomer's very haste attracted the attention of the crowd on the platform.

Mike Todd, the horseman, was not one to hurry unless something important demanded it. His red face carried tragedy as he swung from his bronc and faced Randall.

"Old man Tucker's dead," Mike Todd blurted. "His throat's been cut!"

Then Todd saw Sally Tucker and shut up.

There was an instant of stunned silence. Randall saw the color drain from Sally Tucker's face. He slipped an arm about her waist to steady her. Instantly, she gained control of herself.

"Don't," she said shortly. "I'll be all right. But please do something."

Randall voiced a quick order at Mike Todd.

"Get Doc Speers. Tell him to hurry out to Tucker's cabin."

The crowd broke up quickly as Randall headed for the stable where he kept his pony. A backward glance told him that his luck was still out. Sally Tucker was moving down the street with two ladies to comfort her. Then Higgins followed with her suitcase.

Big drops of rain were sending up little puffs of dust from the powdery street when the constable brought his big rangy cayuse out of the stable. Randall had been right about the weather, but he had made a mess of everything else. One fool move had made him look ridiculous before Sally Tucker, and he had given Higgins plenty of opportunity to talk. Now Randall had a murder case on his hands, with the town in a critical mood.

Other riders fell in behind him as the constable rode out of town, silent men whose attitudes were all too clear. They wanted to

know the truth about old Ben Tucker's death. They wanted to see how Dave Randall would handle matters. Was he really a good lawman, or just a two-fisted saloon bouncer?

Doctor Speers joined him at the edge of town. Shorty Pell, who was a henchman for Higgins, reined in beside them a few seconds later.

"Thought I'd better see how a smart lawman runs things," Shorty said maliciously. "Other folks will want to know."

"Keep outa the way," Randall snapped. "I"m particular who I educate."

The rain became a veritable deluge before they reached the rickety cabin which Tucker had used as a place of refuge between prospecting trips. He had called it a home, but after Sally went away, it had been nothing more than a blind to cover the fact that Tucker's real interest was somewhere back in the hills. Ben Tucker's real paydirt did not come from a grubby shaft behind the cabin.

Randall squinted through the sheet of water blurring his vision, ruefully aware that the ground on all sides had turned into a sea of gumbo.

If the killer had left any trail, it was gone now.

There was no longer any trace of the hoofprints made by Mike Todd's horse on the way to town.

Randall halted just short of the cabin door to give an order to the men behind him.

"Stay here while Doc and I have a look. You'll have to take the wetting 'til I've been over the ground."

Shorty Pell's sarcastic snicker was an obvious play for the attention of the crowd. It bothered Randall to feel that Shorty's plan was succeeding. The townsmen had come out to be critical, and the rain was making them charitable.

Out of the corner of an eye Randall saw two riders come up.

One was Higgins and the other was Sally Tucker.

"Can I see my father?" Sally asked quietly.

There was a note of strain in her voice, but she kept her emotions well under control.

Randall ranted under his breath at Higgins for bringing her, but he tried to make his reply sound calm.

"Come in out of the rain, but don't touch anything until Doc gives the word."

Then he slid down from his horse and went into the cabin. For a moment, he could not make out anything in the gloomy little room. He lighted a lamp hanging from the ceiling. Then he heard Sally gasp behind him. A diminutive corpse lay on the plank flooring. Sally turned outside into the rain.

OLD man Tucker's throat had been slashed horribly. The fact was surprising enough in a land where gunshots were the common cause of violent death. But an even more astonishing fact was that Tucker wore no blue denim levis. He was fully clothed from the waist up and his boots lay on the floor near the body. Tucker's short legs were covered by his red flannel underwear.

Constable Randall moved forward with the doctor, stooping to watch as the medico examined the dead man. There was an ugly mark on the prospector's head, evidently the mark of a heavy club or a gun butt. Tucker had been knocked down first. His throat had been cut as he lay unconscious on the floor. That seemed clear from the bloodstain on the planks. Red fluid had spurted from an artery while Tucker was prone.

What bothered Randall was that the stain ended so abruptly. He considered the fact thoughtfully, trying to concentrate his attention and forget Sally Tucker outside. Here was a spot where his powers of observation and deduction could serve him. He could not afford to fail.

Randall covered the corpse with a clean blanket, then turned to examine the rest of the cabin. The search did not require many minutes. The place was almost bare, showing definitely that Tucker had not been using it as a regular place of abode. But the killer had torn out the shelves.

Randall went to the door to ask Sally a few questions. "Dad was working on a prospect in the mountains," Sally said, mastering her grief. "He wrote me he had struck it rich, but he wanted to make everything certain before I returned. Three days ago I received his message to come."

Randall nodded. "Then he was waiting for you to arrive. Someone murdered him while he waited. I wonder why?"

"I know," Higgins said, indicating that anyone but a complete idiot would be equally well informed. "He carried a chart of his gold strike. He wanted to file his claim before he went back to work it."

Randall nodded again. "Sounds reasonable. Maybe you can tell us why the killer stole his levis?"

"Please!" It was Sally Tucker's voice. "My father has been murdered and you men seem more interested in a political wrangle."

Doctor Speers took her arm gently. "Easy, lass," he soothed. "There isn't much to be done. Whoever killed your father left no trace. It won't be easy to find the guilty man."

"Not with a constable who has more fist than brain," Shorty Pell snapped from the doorway.

Randall paid no attention. The missing levis bothered him almost as much as the way the red stain on the floor was cut off.

It ought to mean something.

He turned back and crossed the cabin floor to the sheet iron stove, and opened the door. Thrusting his hand inside, he could feel the lingering warmth in the ashes. His fingers closed on something hard and circular. Even before he drew it out, Randall knew that it was a button from a pair of miner's pants.

"That answers one question," he said grimly, displaying the blackened bit of metal. "The levis were burned."

Sally, who had moved into the doorway, cried, "The murderer must have known! Father must have talked!'"

"What do you mean?" Randall inquired.

Her voice was shaking as she went on, as though the break in her studied self-control had left her with less will to remain calm.

"My father made a map of his diggings, just as Higgins said. He sewed that map in the waistband of his trousers for safekeeping. His murderer must have known about it. Somebody burned the trousers to hide the fact."

Shorty Pell spoke with elaborate sadness.

"No tracks, no clues. The killer was smart enough to hide his trail by burnin' the pants. I reckon we're askin' too much of a gent like Randall to expect him to come up with the guilty party.'"

Sally Tucker flushed angrily at the way the political feud was being dragged in once more.

Randall studied Shorty's narrow features with sudden interest. The man was entirely too happy.

"Thanks, Shorty," the constable said slowly. "Maybe it ain't as tough as you make out. For one thing, it wasn't Tucker's levis that got burned. I figure the killer got blood on his own pants when he killed Mr.Tucker. To avoid being trapped by the bloodstain, the killer traded pants with the old man. Then the murderer burned his own pants in the stove."

"How do you make that out?" Higgins demanded.

"The bloodstain on the floor comes to an abrupt end. No splashes. Something caught the end of the spurt, and I figure it was the killer's pant leg."

"And what does it get you?" Shorty sneered.

"Plenty. The killer was here not so long ago. The stove is still warm. Some smart hombre knew about Ben Tucker's map, but he didn't know where it was. He went away from here thinking he had failed in his robbery, but now he's mighty happy because he's got the map in the levis he's wearing. There's just one smart hombre who was out of town at the right time this morning. Now

(Concluded on page 74)

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The blindfolded Kid toppled forward, felt himself falling

The Dodge City Kid Rides a Gun Trail Through Sundown Basin—to Cheat the Hang-noose and Attend a Wedding!

SINGING BULLETS

By BEN FRANK

THE atmosphere in the rickety poker room slowly drew as tight as a noose around a condemned man's throat. The Dodge City Kid felt twenty pairs of eyes studying him. His bitter young-old face showed nothing to those staring men. But inside, he was all drawn up like a coiled steel spring.

"Stranger," the sheriff said, his eyes as sharp as chips of blue glass, "it's only natural that we here in Sundown Basin are some curious about a fellow who inquires after a murderer!"

The lawman put his big hands into his trouser pockets, pulling back his long-tailed coat, and the Kid saw an ivory-handled gun holstered under the sheriff's arm.

"Jim Barton did me a good turn," the Kid replied. "Only natural I'd stop by to see him on my trip north."

The Kid realized that the sheriff would later search his files and find a picture. Then the Kid would have to hide like a sneaking coyote.

"Maybe you're a good friend of Barton?" the lawman suggested.

"Maybe."

"Stranger," the sheriff said, letting his long coat slip back over the ivory-handled gun, "Jim Barton has no friends in Sundown Basin now. Any friend of his ain't welcome here!"

A man moved forward from the shadowy back part of the room. He had a flabby, purple-veined face and thick scornful lips.

Half-forgotten memories swept the Kid, and his eyes slid to the table where the flabby hombre had been sitting with a scrawny pok-

er player. The scrawny man got up, too, leaving the table deserted. But on it, the Kid saw what he'd rather expected to see. A half-dozen bottles of beer.

"Sheriff," the flabby hombre said, "I reckon we owe this stranger a little explanation." He turned to the Kid, eyes glittering above the amused grin on his lips. "I'm Clint Elbe, the biggest cattleman in the basin. Your friend, Jim Barton, is a friend of mine, or was. We own adjoining ranches. He's accused of murderin' my foreman, Chuck Egger. Personally, I'm beginnin' to wonder if he didn't."

The back of the Kid's neck felt cold, and his heart began to hammer.

"Never figured Jim was the murdering kind," he said flatly.

"Me neither," Clint Elbe drawled. "But him and my foreman had a bad fuss, and Jim Barton got pretty mad. Sometimes when a man's mad—" He shrugged his ponderous shoulders. "Anyway, the sheriff figures Jim shoved my foreman over Devil's Cliff. What makes it look bad for Jim Barton is that he's left the country."

"That's right," the sheriff agreed bleakly. "We found Chuck Egger's body at the foot of the cliff. But Barton, he's hid out some place in the hills."

Fat Clint Elbe shook his head. "Runnin' away like that was a fool thing to do."

"Anyone see Jim Barton throw your foreman over the cliff?" the Kid asked.

Elbe shook his head, his cheeks wobbling like jelly.

"Barton's hat was found beside Chuck Egger's body," the sheriff said. "Reckon that was the last thing Chuck grabbed before he went over. Jim Barton was in too big a hurry to get out of the country to make the ten-mile ride to the foot of the cliff to get back his hat."

Elbe turned to a waiter. "Bring another half-dozen bottles of beer to my table." Then he said to the Kid, "Come drink with me, stranger."

"Thanks, no," the Kid said. "I think I'd like to look at that cliff."

Elbe's thick neck twisted and the side of his fat, veined face came around until one eye glittered at the Kid.

"Better not go out there after night," Elbe wheezed. "It's dangerous. You might slip over." He laughed thickly.

Another shiver moved about the Kid's neck. Dim memories of a giant of a man back in Kansas, who drank great quantities of beer, came back. With the memory of Kansas and home, was a deep bitterness for being hounded for a crime that the Kid had never committed.

HE HOOKED thumbs into his gunbelt and walked unhurriedly to the door. Men moved out of his way. He was taller than most. His thick black hair curled up beneath his big Stetson. His twin Peacemakers hung low and well forward, swinging with the easy motion of his slim hips.

Outside, the night was moonless, with stars half-hidden behind clouds.

The Kid stepped away from the light and rolled a cigarette, his mind going back over the things he'd heard about Jim Barton.

A note from Jim lay deep in his pocket. It was an invitation to Jim's wedding. The Kid guessed that now there wouldn't be any wedding. The bitterness in him deepened. He and Jim had grown up together back in Kansas. Once Jim had saved his life. The Dodge City Kid always paid his debts.

Cigarette glowing, he stepped toward the tie-rail where he'd left his big black horse. From out of the shadows came a footfall. Before he could turn, a sharp pain hit his shoulder blade. It was the punch of a gun muzzle.

"Easy stranger!" a voice gritted.

Another man stole from the shadows. It was the scrawny hombre who had been sitting at the table with Clint Elbe. A rope snaked around the Kid's waist, pinning his arms to his sides. The hombre with the gun jerked the Kid's hands around and knotted them securely with the free end of the rope. There was no noise, no struggle.

The two hombres helped the Kid into his own saddle. They mounted horses. The Kid's six-guns still hung in their holsters, but with his arms bound, their weight brought no comfort.

They rode westward, and the Kid remembered Devil's Cliff and Clint Elbe's words. Again he felt a touch of cold creep over him.

Soon the Kid's arms lost all feeling. He could no longer move his fingers.

As the cayuses plodded on, the Kid thought of Jim's letter, which had reached him through the efforts of a friend.

"I'm marrying the swellest girl in the world," the letter had said, "and I'd like you to be best man at the wedding. How about slipping over here pronto, and spending a few days with me? It's safe enough for you, and no one will be at the wedding except her dad, the preacher and me. And the girl, of course."

No hint of trouble. No trace of impending danger. The Kid owed Jim a debt, and right now it looked as if he'd never have a chance to pay up.

The horses stopped.

As the two captors slid from saddles, their heavy boots scattered loose rocks on the trail. They pulled the Kid off the black, loosened the red bandanna at his throat, and tied it over his eyes. The rope went slack, slipped from his body, letting his limp hands drop to his sides. Pain trickled toward the ends of his fingers as the blood began to circulate. A gun jabbed his spine.

"Walk, stranger!" the scrawny hombre said harshly.

The Kid stepped forward.

Renewed life was running into his arms and fingers. He could feel the comforting swing of the heavy Colts against his thighs. His right hand caressed a gun butt.

The moment the pressure against his back relaxed, he'd fall sideways, rip the blind from his eyes and come up shooting. The odds were against him, but he'd played against odds before. This time the stakes were high —his own life. Perhaps the life of Jim Barton.

He lengthened his step. His right foot reached forward, came down. There was nothing below. His stomach twisted into a knot. His hands clawed empty air.

He toppled forward, felt himself falling. His shoulders struck the loose shale of the steep slope. He let himself somersault over and slide on the flat of his back, his legs thrust forward. He knew that his captors had deliberately walked him over Devil's Cliff.

The incline deepened. Dirt and shale were sent rolling with the weight of his body. There was no stopping this downward skid. The Kid spread his arms and legs, but the speed of descent lessened only slightly. A large rock brushed his side. He wrapped an arm about it. The rock pulled free, rolled against his ribs, driving the wind from his lungs.

He let out a gasping cry of pain as a razor-like projection ripped into his back. He grabbed at the sharp rock with both hands. It was the nose of a deeply-buried boulder. It seemed solid, and it halted his descent, but his legs were dangling over space.

Seconds later, another large rock crashed to the canyon floor a thousand feet below. And from above came a short laugh.

SCARCELY daring to breathe, the Kid clung to his jagged projection. His two captors must have thought he had gone over the cliff, believing the crash of rock to have been the impact of his body below the height.

Saddle leather creaked. The clatter of departing hooves played out on the trail above.

Cautiously, the Kid snaked his lean body above the rock projection and straddled it. Hands free, he drew the bandanna from his eyes. The sky was completely overcast. There was no light.

Dawn broke sultry and bleak. The gray light revealed that the Dodge City Kid would remain a prisoner between the steep cliff above and the precipitous drop to death on the rocks below.

Across the canyon were low foothills that grew in size as they neared the distant mountains. The Kid watched for a sign of life in those foothills. They were barren and evil looking. They held no hope for him. Two buzzards circled high overhead, seeming to sense that before many more hours passed, the marooned hombre would weaken and slip to his death.

The Kid closed his eyes. Hours on the rock began to tell. Strength slowly ebbed out of him.

At noon, something touched his shoulder, slipped along his legs. He thought it was a snake until he saw the loop of a lariat.

"Grab hold," a voice called from above.

The Kid recognized that voice.

"Jim Barton!" he cried. "Good old Jim!"

Reaching the top of the cliff with Jim's help was a matter of only a few seconds. Once again the Dodge City Kid owed his life to lanky Jim Barton.

The two friends slapped each other on the back. The Kid's throat was so lumpy he couldn't talk.

"I heard this morning that a stranger was in town looking for me and that he was going to the cliff," Jim Barton said. "I figured it must be you, so I slipped out of hiding, hoping to find you. You should have waited until daylight to come out here. This is a dangerous place for a man in the dark."

"Especially when the gent is prodded with a six-gun over the edge," the Kid added quietly.

Briefly, he told Jim all that had happened. Jim's face showed disbelief when the Kid mentioned the part the scrawny hombre had played in the game of murder.

"You must have mistaken someone else for Jeff Olsen," Jim said. "Clint Elbe is also a friend of mine. He wouldn't have sent Olsen out to walk a friend of mine over Devil's Cliff."

"I'm not mistaken," the Kid said. "What do you know about this Clint Elbe?"

"He came to the basin about fifteen months ago. Bought the B-X ranch east of mine. Chuck Egger had been foreman of the B-X for several years, so Elbe kept him on. Elbe's been a good neighbor. Always willing to help me out when I need it. Even loaned me money on my spread when I had a little hard luck last year."

The Kid's dark eyes studied Jim's lean face.

"So you owe Elbe money? Maybe he has a mortgage on your ranch? With you out of the way, he'll get possession of your spread?"

"Sure," Jim said, "but he's my friend!"

"Yeah, sure," the Kid replied. "But suppose he's something else. Would he want your ranch bad enough to lay a murder on you to get you out of the way?"

"He wouldn't," Jim declared. "I tell you, he's a good hombre. I don't go much for Jeff Olsen. He reminds me of a snake, but he must be all right, or Elbe wouldn't have him around." Jim's lean face clouded. "I don't understand about the death of Chuck. Or how my old hat got in the canyon with the

[*Turn to page 70*]

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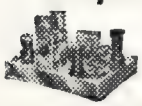

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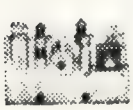

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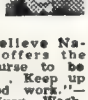

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body. I left my hat hanging on my back porch."

Jim Barton scratched his head and continued.

"Another thing, Chuck and I didn't have any trouble, like they say. That story must have started just because Chuck used to run around with Joan. I didn't even see Chuck the day he was killed. I went over to Bragg City to see about ordering some furniture for a wedding present to Joan. When I got home, she was waiting for me. Told me what had happened, how people were saying I'd shoved Chuck over the cliff, that there was a mob coming to get me. She was pretty scared. I went home with her and have been staying out of sight ever since."

The Kid shook his head.

"Did you ever try to remember something that happened when you were a little squirt, but you couldn't quite get hold of it?"

Jim Barton eyed the Kid curiously.

"You've had a bad night," Jim said gently. "You look pretty bad. We'll go over to McAdam's place, and you can get some sleep. You'll feel all right then."

The Kid knew what Jim was thinking. Jim believed the night's experiences had gotten the best of the Kid's good sense. The Kid grinned a little and said nothing.

THEY found his black pony cropping grass in a ravine not far from the edge of the cliff. Then they rode in friendly silence to the McAdam ranch.

Joan McAdam met them at the door of the house, a tall fair girl with a quick, warm smile for Jim and a friendly word for the Kid. Old Ance McAdams, her father, shook hands with the Kid. Neither seemed to give a hoot that he was wanted in five States. He was a friend of Jim's, and that was good enough for them.

Jim took the Kid to a quiet room in the back part of the old house.

"You'd better get some rest," he advised.

The Kid flopped down on the edge of the bed. "Where's Clint Elbe's ranch?" he asked. "What kind of a place is it? How large is this valley they call Sundown Basin?"

Jim Barton got a sheet of paper and a pencil.

"The basin's shaped like a meat platter," he explained, sketching out a rough map. "It's surrounded by mountains except for the east end. Elbe's land opens up at the east end of the basin and extends along the north edge. My land joins the west end of Elbe's spread, and runs to the west rim. There's a little pass through the west rim that leads into Indian Valley, but nobody uses the pass."

The Kid sat up straight. "This pass is on your land?"

"They say the Indians used to run stolen stock through it," Jim replied. "It made a short cut to the Mexican border. But that was before my time."

The Kid sank back on the bed. "I'm dead tired," he said, shutting his eyes.

He wanted to get Jim out of there. He had to think about the map Jim had sketched for him. He had to revive a half-forgotten memory which a fat man and a table loaded with beer bottles had pulled up out of a corner of his mind.

Jim shut the door as the Kid dug at the memory, but it was always a little out of his grasp. After a time, he gave up and went to sleep.

Darkness was creeping into the room when the Kid awoke. Going outside, he found Jim and old McAdam at a corral, smoking and talking gloomily. The Kid rolled a cigarette, his long, slim fingers making a neat job of it.

"There are some things I want to look at on the north side of the basin," the Kid told the pair. "I think I'd better get started."

"I'll go with you," Jim offered.

The Kid shook his head. "No. One man can see as much as two, but one man is not as likely to be seen as two. I want another look at Clint Elbe soon. My memory needs prodding."

"Elbe is my friend," Jim Barton protested.

The Kid smiled thinly and went into the corral.

The Dodge City Kid approached Elbe's B-X ranch from the southeast, topped a rise and drew the black to an abrupt stop.

The ranch lay below in the darkness. Light lanced from two windows at the south side of the house. Cattle bawled, and lanterns swung in the hands of men near the beef pens. Above this activity came the rasping screech of a pumping windmill.

The Kid ground-hitched his horse and slowly walked toward the house. Someone cried an order. Suddenly the lanterns went out, leaving only the light from the windows. They reminded the Kid of the gleaming eyes of a wildcat about ready to leap.

Hoofs slapped the hard ground, and a choking dust fog filled the night air. The Kid knew that a big drive had gotten under way. He hesitated a moment, then moved toward the two gleaming eyes of the house.

Looking into a window at a low-ceilinged room, he saw Elbe's ponderous shoulders hunched over a table on which stood a litter of beer bottles. The scrawny Jeff Olsen slouched beside a door, an ash-dripping smoke stuck in a corner of his mouth, his thin arms folded across his chest.

A third hombre sat at the table, across from Elbe. The stranger had a long face and a thin nose that flared a little at the end.

Elbe pulled a bundle of banknotes from a pocket and laid it in front of the man.

"Your share, Nick," Elbe said.

Nick got to his feet, picked up the money and pulled his black hat down to the tips of

his pointed ears.

"A week from today, we'll make another delivery," Nick advised.

He turned and strode through the door where Olsen stood. A little later the Kid heard a horse loping eastward.

INSIDE the house, Elbe's fat fingers toyed with an empty beer bottle. His eyes went to Olsen's bony face.

"We got us a gold mine, Jeff," Elbe said.

He picked up a bottle of beer, put the mouth of the bottle to his puffy lips, and drained it in one long, gurgling drink.

The Kid, feeling a warm glow steal through him, slid back from the window. A memory, clear and strong, shot through his brain like a flash of bright light.

He recalled when he was a wide-eyed button in Dodge City. A fat man had stood at a bar with a deputy and a sheriff guarded him closely. The fat man tipped a bottle of beer, drank it without taking a breath, then smacked his thick lips.

On that day long ago, the sheriff had said, "I reckon this about busts up the cattle stealin' ring, boys."

Now the Kid turned from the house, started toward his horse, tripped and fell. A tin bucket rolled out from under his snarled legs with a deafening clatter. He was up and racing to his horse before the door burst open behind him. He reached the black, leaped into the saddle, sat for a moment very still.

There was no sound of pursuit, so he rode away slowly, quietly.

Once, he thought he saw a shadow far behind. He pulled up at a clump of pine and waited. The shadow melted away in the darkness.

After a time, the Kid rode on, his powerful mount covering the miles between the B-X and McAdam's spread at a fast lope.

It was still two hours to daylight when the Kid put his horse into the McAdam corral. The stars were like gleaming drops of dew in the sky, and the breeze from the mountains was cool and clean against his face. His heart was lighter than it had been since he'd stepped into the poker hall some thirty hours before and learned the plight of his friend. Now the Kid saw all things clearly.

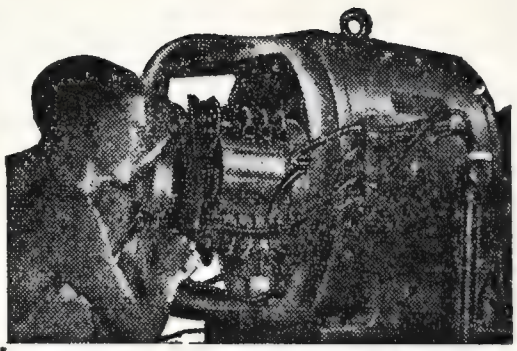
He pounded on the door of the ranch house, and old Ance McAdam, bleary-eyed from sleep, a lamp in his horny fist, let him in. "What kind of a man is your sheriff?" the Kid asked.

McAdam came wide awake.

"Sid Piney is a square shooter. Ain't afraid of the devil. He's been sheriff of Sundown Basin for twelve years and has done a good job of it."

The Kid pulled his Stetson from his black hair and hung it over a peg on the log wall.

[*Turn page*]



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"I must talk to the sheriff," he remarked. "I don't want to show my face in town, because there are too many people who know I'm in the basin. Could you bring Sheriff Piney here? Tell him Jim Barton has just showed up and is ready to talk."

Ance McAdam studied the Kid's face in the yellow lamp light.

"If I can find Piney in town, I'll have him here by ten o'clock," he promised.

Old Ance McAdam was as good as his word.

The hands on the clock in the front room of the ranchhouse pointed to ten when he rode up with Sheriff Piney at his side.

The Kid, Jim Barton and Joan McAdam sat in the room, waiting. Jim's face was tight. The girl's eyes were clouded with worry. The Kid smiled, took a drag on his cigarette and let the smoke roll up around his face. All the tenseness in him was hidden deep down.

McAdam and the sheriff came into the ranchhouse room.

Piney's pale blue eyes whipped about and froze on the Kid's smiling face. The sheriff's hand slipped toward the ivory-butted gun under his long black coat. The Kid's hand blurred and came up, covering the lawman with a big Peacemaker.

The sheriff turned on Ance McAdam.

"You've led me into a trap!" Piney said harshly. "I know who this man is now."

"Nothing will happen to you if you don't go for your gun," the Kid cut in. "I've had McAdam bring you here. I have some things to tell you."

THE sheriff dropped into a chair and laced his fingers across his stomach.

"Get it over with," the lawman said flatly.

"Not many men can empty a full bottle of beer at one drink," the Kid began. "Once, when I was a very small boy, I was looking into a barroom. A fat man, flanked by two lawmen, stood at the bar. He emptied four bottles of beer down his throat, stopping only to set down an empty and pick up a full one. I saw this same man do that trick tonight. I remembered then what one of the lawmen said back there in Dodge City. It was, 'I reckon this about busts up the cattle stealin' ring, boys!' You see, the lawmen were taking this fat hombre to prison."

The sheriff leaned forward, his eyes fixed on the Kid's face.

"Clint Elbe!" Sheriff Piney gasped, and then he leaned back and shook his head slowly. "Kid, you're wanted in five States. Why should I believe you?"

"You don't have to believe me," the Kid said bitterly. "You can check back over the Kansas prison records. But I've got more to say. Elbe's land and Jim's lie end-to-end, making a path the full length of the basin.

The east end opens up to the plains. The west runs into a pass through the hills. It is a short cut to the Border country. Elbe is out of prison and is back in his old business. He's got his old gang together. To make the short cut through the basin safe, he had to have Jim's ranch. That's why he loaned Jim money. When he wanted to get Jim out of the way, Elbe framed him for murder."

Jim stood up. "If he wanted me out of the way, why didn't he push me over the cliff instead of Chuck Egger?"

"I don't know," the Kid said. "Maybe, there wasn't an opportunity. Maybe Chuck had caught on to what was up, and Elbe had to get him out of the way quick." He turned to the sheriff. "When you think back, just how did all these stories about Chuck and Jim having trouble start?"

The sheriff frowned. "Jeff Olsen told us."

The Kid laughed shortly, pushed to his feet and went to a window.

"Last night," he said, "I saw Elbe's men driving cattle to the west. I saw Elbe give a man he called Nick pay-off money."

The Kid's shoulders jerked up, and he felt the blood pound up into his ears.

"I reckon there's going to be another pay-off here," the Kid snapped, "and right soon. There are about eight riders headed this way, and it looks like Clint Elbe's in the lead. I guess somebody followed me last night, after all. He's had just about time enough to ride back and round up a gang and bring 'em back." He faced the room. "There're four of us against eight!"

"Five!" Joan McAdam said.

She reached up and took an old 30-30 from wooden pegs driven into the wall.

Sheriff Piney shoved to his feet, towering over them. "I'll handle these men," he said. "There'll be no war in Sundown Basin as long as I'm the law!"

He walked out on the front porch, leaving the others in the ranchhouse. There was no fear in this man.

Clint Elbe and his men rode up. Their faces went blank at the sight of Sid Piney facing them.

"What do you men want?" Sheriff Piney clipped.

Elbe puffed out his fat lips.

"We're lookin' for the skunk who pushed my foreman over Devil's Cliff."

Inside the house the Kid saw the scrawny Jeff Olsen sidle up to Elbe. Elbe grinned.

"They're goin' to kill Piney," the Kid whispered to Jim at his elbow. "And they'll try to kill us! They'll make it look like we shot it out with the law, killed each other!"

As the Kid saw Olsen's hand snake upward with a gun, his own hands moved, swinging the twin Peacemakers into action. He shot through the open door twice, saw Olsen go limp and pitch to the ground. Jim

[Turn page]

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Barton's six blasted from behind the Kid. The old 30-30 cracked. Two more men tumbled from their saddles.

Clint Elbe's face purpled with fury. The gun in his huge right fist flamed as he spurred his plunging horse to the veranda steps. The Kid triggered and saw the fat Elbe jerk, but Clint Elbe stuck to the saddle and kept coming, his gun blasting at the open door.

Lead burned into the Kid's right shoulder. It flung him back a step. Just as he leveled his left Colt, Elbe rolled out of the saddle.

The pain in the Kid's shoulder made him sick. His knees shook as he sought the floor. Guns crashed over him. Then followed a thick silence.

Elbe and his seven killers were through. Elbe, Olsen and two others were dead. The remaining four lay sprawled about, their faces twisted with pain.

The Kid got shakily to his feet, propped himself against the door jamb. The twin Peacemakers were heavy for him to hold.

The sheriff came toward him.

"Thanks," the lawman said, "for the lead you put into Jeff Olsen. I reckon his bullet had my name on it." The sheriff rolled a cigarette, stuck it between the Kid's white lips and lit it. "I guess this about clears things up," Piney went on. "I figure I can explain what's happened to everyone's satisfaction. I reckon you'll want to hang around here until that shoulder heals some?"

"Yeah," the Kid drawled, grinning at Jim and Joan. "And be best man at a wedding."

The sheriff grinned and buttoned his long black coat over the ivory-handled gun.

"Stay as long as you like," Piney chuckled. "I've forgotten that you're in this part of the country."

LAWMAN'S CHANCE

(Concluded from page 65)

he is acting mighty happy. He is small enough to wear Ben Tucker's levis."

Shorty's grab for his gun was snake-like in its swiftness, but Dave Randall's fist smashed the killer under the chin. Randall grabbed Shorty by the shirt front with one hand, while another hand felt the waistband of the killer's blue denims.

"Something crackles in there," the constable said coldly. "Unless I miss my guess, it's going to be enough to hang a card sharp who never had any right to wear honest men's levis in the first place."

As Dave Randall dragged the struggling murderer through the doorway, he caught a swift glimpse of Sally Tucker's eyes. The girl was crying now. But there was something beside tears, something which gave Dave Randall a good reason to feel cheerful. He moved out into the rain without even knowing that he was getting wet.

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

catch. The meat of young bear was in demand among Portland butchers. And old bear made fine lard. Got forty cents a pound for bear lard. When I could get it out."

"Ever get in an argument with a bear, Herman?"

"Just once. A big bear stole a deer carcass I'd hung. I tracked him and fired for a head shot. Reckon I shot too quick, because I just grooved him along the back. Not enough to cripple him but enough to make him plenty mad. Had one dog with me. That dog saved my life by charging the bear while I got in a killing shot. But the bear hugged and crushed my dog to death."

"You consider cougar dangerous?"

"Never had one tackle me. Doubt some cougar stories I hear."

"What animal is the smartest?"

"The cross-fox. I trapped red and gray fox and cross-fox. Did you know a cross-fox will climb a tree? It's a fact. When dogs press him too hard, he'll run up a leaning trunk. Dogs run past, wise ol' fox hops down and rambles off with a grin on his face.

"Deer are mighty intelligent, too. I had a number of pet deer from time to time. Had one that went along with me when I rode after cattle, on my ranch down on Crescent Creek. That deer made friends with my dogs and when he scented danger he stuck close to 'em. Had bear cub pets, too. I'd trapped the ol' she-bear in a peculiar way. Fixed spikes around the open top of a metal beer barrel and put honey in the bottom. She-bear went after that honey and couldn't get her head out, naturally. She bawled and roared around and walloped down young trees. I had to maneuver lively for a finish shot to keep from gettin' knocked cold by that beer barrel."

Herman's "good times" ended when the bounty was removed from most of the predators, such as cougar, coyotes and lynx. On top of that, a year-around closed season was put on the most valuable fur-bearing animals.

"Had a flock of grouse for pets once, too. They ate out of my hand. Along come a hunter and cleaned up on 'em. It was out o' season so I got in touch with the game warden. Him and the county judge cleaned up on that game hog."

Roaming Critters

I'd always wondered how far wild critters roam and Herman told me about a pet buck, turned loose every fall, that was seen 200 miles away in company with a pretty young doe. Cougar, he said, hunt in a big circle that takes about a week to cover. Bears travel long distances, too. Specially when interested in a herd of sheep or a bee ranch.

"The nicest pets I ever had," Herman reflected, "was a pair o' skunks. Clean little animals, they are, and better mousers than cats. But they took to sleepin' in my bed."

"And you wasn't strong for that, huh?"

"Well, I had a pet bear that was nappin' there at the time. He didn't like it."

[*Turn page*]

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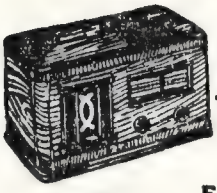

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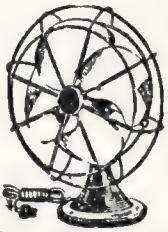

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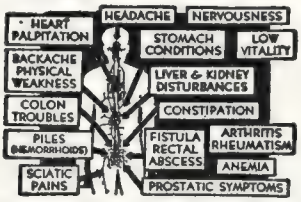

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He got back onto the subject of that pet deer that roamed 200 miles after a mate. The owner had put a collar and bell on it.

"That buck sure startled a lot of hunters. They'd be settin' around a campfire, after a hard day of deer hunting, mebbe without seeing a deer. This friendly buck would suddenly appear and lie down by the fire. Mountain folks knew that buck and never bothered it. But city sports wasn't so scrupulous. One day I came onto that buck's collar and bell, hangin' in a tree."

This trappin' Texan told me he could go to any dugout he built, some as long ago as 30 years, and find it in good order.

An Old Dugout

I was convinced of that in a peculiar manner. One day, while following a crestline trail, I came on an old dugout. The pine needles had nearly covered the room. But the log sides and log roof were still sound, except for a hole knocked in one corner by a falling tree.

I looked in and saw a neat stack of sawed wood, and the whole thing built and arranged like Herman had told me. Even to the remains of some old drying boards, on which he had stretched and dried skins.

A heap of that high Cascades country is about as wild as it ever was and fur prices are sky-high and hombres that savvy how to trap and take care of furs will probably be occupyin' some of those old dugouts by now.

For the fur-bearing animals are comin' back, gals and galluses. Let's hope the Willamette eels will do the same. And if you happen to believe in Injun magic, then keep a eye peeled for buffalo and passenger pigeons!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

LUTHER SHERRALL, a small bull-necked hombre with hairy arms and dumpy legs, set out to build himself a cattle empire. Under the whiplash of his gun-hung jackals, the Dry River ranchers found themselves helpless. As Sherrall continued to absorb their ranges, he forced the construction of a giant irrigation dam, and to draw more victims into his evil web, he changed the name of the ramshackle town to "Paradise."

It was this name that gave Author Jackson Cole the title for his new action-packed novel, HELL IN PARADISE, which appears in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS.

Death starts a gruesome ride in this story with the murder of the first rancher to raise his hand against Luther Sherrall, and then comes the disappearance of a young engineer.

Ranger Jim Hatfield, posing as a hick cattleman in search of new grazing, rides into Luther Sherrall's falsely named bailiwick, and powder trouble bursts out hot and fast. For Jim Hatfield is just in time to warn another of Sherrall's foes that murder is creeping toward him in his ranchhouse.

Jim Hatfield gets into the ranchhouse just in time, finds Sherrall's killers ready to tackle Rancher Oden, and then—

"Hatfield had to shoot," the story reads. "He could not chance letting Oden be stabbed to

the heart if there was a slip. He was just inside the hall from the main room as he raised his thumb from his Colt hammer, firing from the hip. Driscoll uttered a shrill scream, the sound ripped from him by the blasting shock of the lead cutting his forearm. The knife flew from his hand, and he slewed around, fell to his knees and doubled up, gripping his punctured wrist."

Then, with the pack of Sherrall's gunmen upon him, Jim Hatfield has the fight of his life. And it is but the first of his knock-down, drag-out and bullet-tossing scraps with Sherrall's hellions.

Author Cole has cleverly worked a second "Ranger" into this story—a killer who poses as Jim Hatfield, and it is the coming of this man to Dry River—beg your pardon, we mean Paradise—that doubles the trouble already staring Ranger Hatfield in the face. For the honor of the great corps of the Lone Star State is at stake!

Luther Sherrall has more tricks in his fiendish bag to play against the Ranger who attempted to rally the ranchers against the big land steal. Sherrall's plot reaches out to an important politico, and the scheme of the man with the dumpy legs and hairy arms begins to succeed. Where two men fought before, now a score are involved.

That is how HELL IN PARADISE works to a thundering climax in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS. It's a humdinger from start to finish—and will hold you breathless as you follow The Lone Wolf lawman on one of his most exciting trouble trails!

We are also presenting a top-rate short story by Chuck Martin, entitled TUMBLEWEED, in the same issue of TEXAS RANGERS. The famous old town of Tombstone, Arizona, figures in this yarn, and you'll find a chief character known by the initials "J.B."

[*Turn page*]

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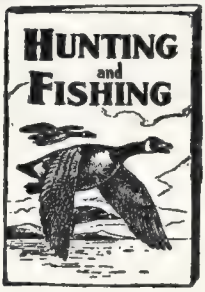

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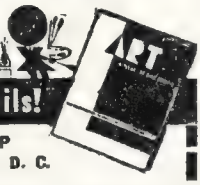

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So be on hand, ladies and hombres, for the next gala issue of TEXAS RANGERS. There'll be more stories and features, too—all in all, a grand reading treat from cover to cover!

OUR MAILBOX

THE letters certainly are streaming in from all corners of North America, and many of them are applications for membership in the TEXAS RANGERS CLUB. Keep sending in those letters and postcards—the more the merrier.

We find the argument about whether Ranger Jim Hatfield should fall in love is getting much hotter, so if any of you readers want to shove your branding iron into the fire, you had better hurry up. Maybe one way of settling that question is to ask Author Jackson Cole to try out a romantic story on the readers, and then we'll see what happens!

The members of the TEXAS RANGERS CLUB declare that they should have first say about the stories, but we run an open house here, and it is first come first served. That certainly doesn't put a club member behind a newcomer. It's just the kind of fair play that is expected in the Lone Star State, and any other American State, as far as that goes.

We have a feeling that if a reader is a member of the TEXAS RANGERS CLUB, he'll whip out his pen or pencil and get a letter to the Editor before any tenderfoot.

The membership is open to all, and the new readers will find a handy coupon in this department to join up. Some of these recruits continue to ask us if joining the TEXAS RANGERS CLUB permits them to ride with the real Rangers in Texas, and also to go out and tackle criminals. So once more we had better advise these tenderfoots that such is not the case. This club is merely a get-together for the readers of TEXAS RANGERS, and membership does not carry with it any privileges with regard to any law-enforcement agency.

Now that that's settled again, we can turn to some of the letters. Here is the first one, and, sure enough, it's about a love affair for Jim Hatfield!

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I see where you are having trouble about whether Jim Hatfield should have a sweetheart or not. I think that although he is a Texas Ranger that doesn't mean he shouldn't have one. He could marry and his wife stay in Austin and see him after he returns from an assignment, or go with him as a secret investigator. As you know, women can sometimes do secret investigating where men would not suspect them.—*Herbert Glenn, Clanton, Ala.*

Well, Herb, that is putting the cart before the horse. Jim Hatfield hasn't found the girl yet—and you want him married and his wife helping him in the field. Thanks a lot for the letter.

Here's another note:

I have been reading your magazine ever since the leading man, James (Jim) Hatfield, joined Captain "Roarin' " Bill McDowell's Ranger Troop. Speaking of Jim Hatfield falling in love, I do not have a certain copy now, but if you look back to a certain past issue, you will find that our Lone Wolf has fallen in love long ago. However, if the author, Jackson Cole, would leave the girls out of Hatfield's life, I think it would be better.—*Hazel Knox, Pasadena, Calif.*

Sorry we couldn't quote all of your letter, Hazel, but what is given here is certainly interesting, because you certainly take the opposite viewpoint from Herbert Glenn. We can't recall Jim Hatfield ever having a real honest-to-goodness love affair, but we'll check through our files again just to follow your instructions, and you might be right.

The next letter strikes a different note:

Please accept this as a membership application. I am an American, a fifty-three-year-old bachelor, and lived in Texas in 1918, and love the whole State —also the people that live there. I sincerely believe it is impossible to make your magazine any better, or more interesting. This copy was my first, but I have placed a standing order with the newsdealer.

[*Turn page*]

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There is a very interesting legend of "Lover's Leap" near Waco, Texas, that I would love to see in print. Do you know of any way I could get it? I sure would love to hear from any, or all, of your readers that care to write.—*Harry P. Rager, Box 214, Denbo, Pa.*

We haven't anything in this office, Harry, about that Indian legend, but perhaps one of the readers might be able to help you out. Thanks for the compliment you paid us and thanks for the letter.

Here is a missive from way far off:

I like the TEXAS RANGERS Magazine very much, especially the Jim Hatfield stories by Jackson Cole. My father was a Texas Ranger before the Great War when trouble between General Carranza and Villa broke out in Mexico. Once he was sentenced to death by General Carranza, but was saved through the influence of the United States. My Dad was a while in Marfa and Selma Blanca, Texas. I have never been in the States. I was born in South Rhodesia, where a roundup is done on your feet and horses are rare.—*L. Games, Bulawayo, S. Rhodesia, S. Africa.*

We certainly hope that Mr. Games has the opportunity of visiting us in the United States *muy pronto.* Sometimes we are amazed to find out how far our magazines go, and it is very pleasant to get a letter from a loyal supporter so far away.

Well, that finishes our excerpts from your letters. But it's plumb fine to hear from everybody, and the Editor reads every letter through from start to finish, and he sure enjoys 'em all though it isn't possible to quote from more than a few in this department.

Keep up your correspondence, *amigos.* Please send all your ideas, comments and suggestions to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Don't forget that address. Thanks to everybody! *Adios.*

—THE EDITOR.

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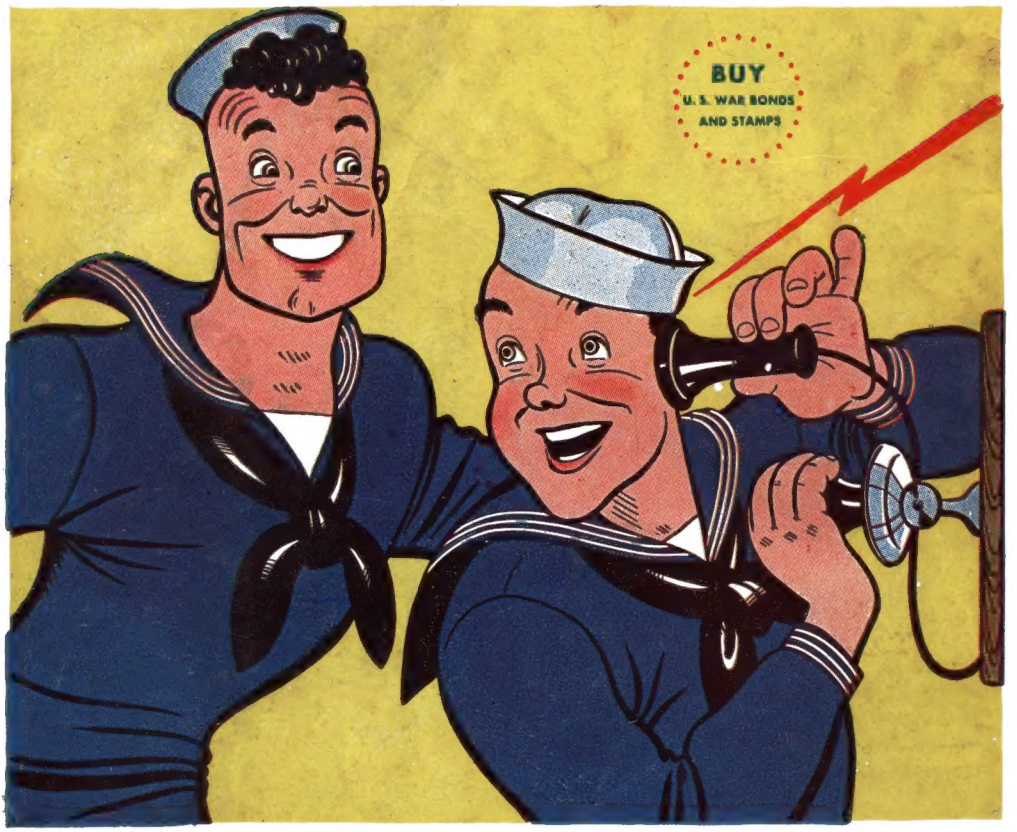

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